

# Halo: The Secret SpartanClassifed Files

by Auralee

Category: Halo

Genre: Adventure, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Master Chief/John-117

Status: Completed

Published: 2007-07-06 05:09:51

Updated: 2007-09-26 04:33:36

Packaged: 2016-04-26 23:18:17

Rating: M

Chapters: 20

Words: 32,646

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: A collection of 'deleted scenes' compiled and posted for the enjoyment of readers everywhere. For everyone who's been screaming for a sequel to Secret Spartanthis isn't a sequel, but it's for you anyway. Rated for language and content. COMPLETED!

## 1. Chapter 1: Alternate Prologue

Hello to all my readers! For everyone who's been screaming for a sequel to Halo: The Secret Spartan, this is for you: a collection of "deleted scenes" which didn't quite make the final grade for whatever reason. Feel free to read and review!

Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

### 1: Not-So-Sweet Dreams

She slept in seeming peace, dark hair drifting over her face. Her life was hell, but it was times such as this one where she was allowed to rest and forget the horrors of being a soldier, of being a Spartan. Unfortunately, even her dreams were now being shattered of their calming influence, and the peace they once had would soon be gone.

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Every soldier on HALO-04 was assembled in the large amphitheater, waiting for a weapons demonstration to begin. Among them was the famed 'Floodwall Platoon,' a group of warriors whose record against the Flood was outstanding. Their captain, a human named Corin, and his second in command, the human Marin, waited in anticipation to see the new weapon the science guild had crafted.

"I wonder what it will be," Corin muttered. "The Flood seem to die quickly enough with out current weaponry."

"No, sir," Marin broke in. "I have a friend in the science guild who showed me the current kill rates with our weapons in comparison to whatever the scientists cooked up: this thing, whatever it is, can kill a Flood form in mere seconds. And from what she said, they still have more refinements to make that could improve rate of fire and other things to bring them down faster."

"Well, then, I eagerly await the demonstration."

A scientist walked out on the platform at the front of the amphitheater, and a dead silence fell. She held an unusual device in her hands, which she seemed barely able to carry. Setting it down on a table nearby, she turned to the assembled soldiers.

"Welcome, fine warriors. You have all done much to turn back and defeat the Flood. Now we give you a new advantage to help turn the tide." She moved to a control panel, dimmed the lights, and activated a holographic display of the device she had been holding.

"Our studies of the Flood show that, while they have strong thresholds for heat and cold, they cannot withstand focused temperature extremes. We have also noted increasing instances of Flood combat forms regenerating after being wounded numerous times. Based on battlefield reports, this occurs less with the plasma energy weapons than with others; we theorize that this is due to the high temperatures that is characteristic of plasma in general.

"The Sentinel beam was originally designed for use on our security drones, with a beam capable only of stopping a target with minor injury. We have since modified it for use in combat scenarios, especially against the Flood." The woman depressed a control, and a schematic of the weapon replaced its holographic image. "It fires a focused beam of energy with an approximate temperature of 5,000 standard degrees, and is difficult for non-shielded targets to withstand. As yet, we have only a small fusion cell available to recharge the weapon, but are in the process of developing a better power source. However, the weapon itself is quite effective.

"With the High Council's approval, I have arranged for a small demonstration of the Sentinel beam's capabilities. If you would be so kind as to stand back, we can begin."

The soldiers cleared away from the platform; the scientist hefted the Sentinel beam, nodded, and assumed a firing stance as a containment cage was lowered. Inside the cage, a Flood combat form was thrashing in a vain attempt to escape. She nodded again and the cage was opened.

The Flood form came bursting out, leaping straight for the young woman in front of it. Corin noticed his second-in-command tensed, as the Flood hurled itself at the woman. Not even hesitating for a second, she raised the weapon and fired.

A beam of orange light shot from the weapon and speared the creature, giving off a large amount of heat and causing the room to stink of charred meat. The Flood form staggered back, and the scientist fired a second time, moving it up and down like a scalpel. In a matter of seconds the combat form had been reduced to a pile of blackened flesh. The woman lowered the weapon and turned back to the assembled

soldiers.

"As I said, a highly effective weapon against the Flood. The Sentinel beam will be made available to you for combat use in a few days. I trust you will use it to great effect." She turned and walked off of the platform, and the soldiers filed out, impressed by the new weapon.

Alaya was on her way back to the laboratory when Corin and Marin caught up with her.

"Marin, what a pleasant surprise! I trust you enjoyed seeing the new beam weapon?"

"A nice improvement from the standard ballistics we use most of the time. I have to wonder, though, how you managed to convince the Council to allow a Flood form as a test subject."

"By promising them that there would be containment fields in place to contain the Flood form if things got bad. They were turned on the moment the cage came down, and I was more than prepared to burn it to ash." She turned and discreetly studied the other man nearby. \_Must be Marin's commanding officer.\_ "Once I finish working on the modifications, the rate of fire and weapon effectiveness will be greatly improved."

"I look forward to testing the new weapon myself," Corin said quietly, finding himself disliking the scientist's blustery ways and apparent lack of concern.

"Captain, I don't think you've met Alaya. Alaya, this is Captain Corin, my platoon leader. Alaya's been a family friend ever since I can remember." Marin quickly made introductions, noticing the cold look in his captain's eyes.

"A pleasure, Captain," Alaya smiled lightly as she shook his hand. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a lot of work to do. Marin, I imagine I'll drop by later, so stay out of trouble."

Marin shook his head as the young scientist turned and entered the laboratory. "Alaya's looked after me for years. She seems to think it's her duty to keep an eye on me."

"Obviously. Alaya, is that really her name? Who in their right minds would name their child 'Beloved'? Honestly!"

"She was the firstborn," Marin replied quietly. "Her parents loved her greatly."

Alaya entered the laboratory and clenched her hands tightly into fists. Corin's coldness had bothered her for reasons she didn't understand. It also bothered her how she and Marin had had to pretend to be just friends, rather than be brother and sister as they were. \_It has to be done, though. No one would believe it if they knew Petrarch's firstborn was a daughter instead of a son. It's best for Marin if I pretend to be his friend and not his older sister. Besides, this way I have no fear of false friends coming out of the woodwork.\_ She noticed a terminal blinking in the corner and walked over to study the console; there was a lot of work to be done, and no time to spend on musings and speculations.

**\*\*&&\*\***

She sat up and rubbed her eyes, noticing grimly that it was still dark outside. \_Can't be much later than 0400\_, she thought with a yawn. The dream that had woke her still flittered through her mind, present yet elusive. \_I'll figure it out later. There's a lot to do today, and no time to waste\_. Kicking off her blankets, she changed from tank top and shorts to standard military fatigues, strapped on a pair of combat knives, and prepared to face the day.

## 2. Chapter 2: Alternate Beginning

Hehe...I love this scene; unfortunately it didn't quite make the grade. This is an alternate beginning scene, which I think is funny. I'll let you decide, though...

Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo.

### 2: Accuracy and Mockery

While Ackerson was still facing her, and before he had the chance to turn away, Blade squeezed the trigger; the report of the sniper rifle rang out clear, and Ackerson felt something hard strike him right between the eyes. Lifting a hand to his forehead, he nearly fainted when it came away red.

"Cover the Colonel! Sniper!" The Spartans took position around the colonel, then stopped, surprised by a low chuckle from General West of all people.

"At ease, Spartans. He's fine. Non-lethal rounds, Colonel: the shooter wanted to send a message."

"\_BLADE!!!!\_"

At the sound, Blade bolted, wincing as she caught herself making more noise than she'd wanted; hearing her sudden flight the Spartans turned and opened fire. One of them, an expert sniper herself, fired a three-round burst from her rifle, saw two bullets miss and the third strike home.

"I hit him. Shoulder wound."

"OK, Linda got a bead on the sniper. Let's move."

**\*\*(A/N)** From here it goes on to their almost catching Blade in the woods, and picks up right before West drops in to see exactly what she was up to.**\*\***

The next day, Ackerson was still angry. Taking the Spartans with him, so that they might identify the sniper, he marched off to the southern edge of Camp Hayes. As they approached a bunkhouse, they spotted General West sitting on the steps, an almost guarded expression on his face.

"She's not in."

"The hell she's not! I know she's in there, and I damn well mean to

have a word with her!" Ackerson shouted.

The Spartans, none too pleased with being so close to the ONI colonel, almost missed what was going on in the tree behind him; as it was, they had a hard time acting as if all were normal. A hand had silently descended to the left of, and slightly behind, Ackerson's head, and started opening and closing in mockery of human speech. With every word that came out of his mouth, the hand opened and closed, occasionally pausing to direct obscene gestures at Ackerson's head. \_Whoever that is has a lot of courage to mock a superior officer,\_ the Chief thought as he fought to keep a straight face; it was unusual enough for him to feel like laughing, but even more unusual for him to find someone mocking an officer amusing. Glancing over to see West's reaction, he was surprised to find the older man struggling not to laugh. As it was, his eyes were crinkled in what could pass for either annoyance or amusement; John bet it was the latter.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again, that worthless excuse of a soldier is the biggest mistake ONI ever made!" Ackerson appeared to be winding down in his diatribe, and the hand took that moment to direct a one-fingered gesture at his ear. West finally lost his self-composure and began chuckling; the hand retreated.

"What is so funny? She's been a mockery since the program even started!"

"Even more than you'd guess, Colonel," West smiled, and Ackerson turned around to find a red maple tree. There was a rustling noise in the branches which didn't seem to be caused by any breeze.

"Who's up there?" Ackerson shouted.

"You really need to control your temper a bit more, Ackerson," a clear, resonant voice called down; there was something regal about it, as if it were an officer speaking. It was a woman's voice, and seemed to have a definite sound of laughter, almost as if there was nothing to worry her in the slightest.

"Blade!"

"Hardly," the feminine voice replied, a harder edge beginning to creep into the lilting tones. "And no, I'm not coming down, so you might as well state your business and go away."

Ackerson shook with barely suppressed rage.

"Where were you yesterday afternoon?"

"In my bunk, carving a new set of panpipes. Never left it once."

"And you expect me to believe that?"

"I expect you to believe your own eyes, once you see the surveillance cameras from yesterday afternoon," the unknown woman said, its tone definitely harsh rather than amused. One could almost feel the tension in the air between the officer and the woman in the tree—one furious, the other bitter.

Ackerson went white with rage, and stormed off. The Spartans followed, but Linda turned and looked back in time to see a slender figure hang out of the tree, knees clutching a branch as she hung upside down. Long brown hair was pulled back in a tight braid, which dangled down almost to the ground. Lifting a small wooden pipe to her lips, the apparition began to play; the tune was faintly Oriental, and sounded both sweet and sad. West turned around and, seeing the figure, smiled and shook his head.

"You know, one of these days he's going to figure out how you manage to be two places at once."

"Then I'll just have to learn some new tricks," the woman replied smoothly as she flipped down from the branch and landed on her feet.

### 3. Chapter 3: Eagle Eyes

Ok, this one I was trying to show another facet of Blade that most didn't see. Didn't turn out, though, and I never finished it. Oh well, hopefully it's not too bad. Enjoy!

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#### 3: Eagle Eyes

The Spartans had tracked Laura to an unusual place: a veterinary hospital. An older woman in a plain khaki suit approached them.

"Hello. How may I help you?"

"We were just looking for a friend of ours, and we think she may have stopped in here. Have you seen a woman, tall, dark hair?"

"Oh, Laura! Yes, she comes in every day to check on an eagle she brought in. Would you like to see him?" When they nodded, she led them to a series of outdoor cages. In one of them, a large bald eagle roosted on a branch, staring at Laura with a fierce gaze. Laura seemed unperturbed as she approached and held out her forearm; the eagle awkwardly shuffled sideways and fluttered down onto her arm.

"Hello, Palantir. How are you doing today?" Laura's voice sounded light and happy as she stroked the bird's feathers and felt its wing. The eagle clicked its beak and watched her stroke it. The Spartans gazed awestruck at this living symbol of power and majesty, barely hearing what their guide was saying.

"She brought the eagle in a few weeks ago with a broken wing, and comes in every day to tend it. Most of us are glad she does, since wild eagles are difficult to help. There's a unique bond between them now. He'll only let Laura come near him, which suits most of us just fine." They continued to watch as a red-haired young woman approached the Spartan and 'her' eagle. The bird clicked its beak in warning, and flew off into the rafters of its enclosure. Laura, seeing this, almost burst into laughter.

"Did you see? Palantir flew! He'll be able to go back home soon!" she shouted, her face alight with something the Spartans couldn't quite identify.

"Yeah, I saw," the aide replied. "I know quite a few of us will be glad to see the tail-end of him." The younger woman looked oddly at Laura. "Just curious, why do you call him Palantir?"

"It's a long story, literally. The simplest explanation is that palantir means 'far-sighted.' Since eagles can see for miles in clear weather, it seemed to fit him." She scanned the rafters, dark eyes shining as she spotted him near the very top. "I'll take him to the woods tomorrow; since I brought him here, I should be the one to bring him home."

"I'd hurry, if I were you," the aide whispered. "I heard the review board is set on keeping him here."

"They won't get that chance," Laura whispered back as her smiling face quickly darkened into a frown. "I'll take him out tonight." There was a look in her eyes as she said this which almost mirrored the eagle's piercing stare. As John saw this, he remembered the last thing CPO Mendez had taught him, just before he left to train the other Spartans: 'You are just like that eagle: fast, powerful, and deadly.' Now, having seen an eagle in the flesh, he realized how true those words had been. I wonder how true they are for her, he mused.

#### 4. Chapter 4: Down, But Never Out

Ok, this one's a little wierd--I wondered what would happen if the unstoppable Blade got sick. Seeing as very little else could stop her, well I thought I'd give it a go. Enjoy!

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#### 4. Down, But Never Out

Still new to Camp Hayes, the Spartans were observing another of Blade's workouts. The woman was jogging at a sedate pace along the base track, twirling a pair of nunchaku around her body in an easy manner. None of the Spartans saw anything amiss, but West looked bothered. Something's not right, she never goes easy on herself, he thought darkly. His expression grew even graver when she stumbled, despite the fact that she rolled smoothly to her feet and passed the whole thing off as just part of her workout. Moving to a com panel, he put in a call to Adams Medical Facility, and was answered by a warm female voice.

"Dr. Gedeon speaking."

"Dr. Gedeon, this is General West. We have a sick soldier on base who's refusing to let on."

The voice on the other end let out an explosive sigh: she sounded exasperated. "Why am I not surprised? I'll be right there, General."

Meanwhile, Blade was packing up and approaching the edge of the base track, where her best friend was waiting.

"Laura, how long have you been sick?"

"Who says I'm sick?" Blade's bluff proved useless when she dropped the towel in her hand, which was shaking rather badly.

The other woman looked at her, blue eyes containing a look of deep disgust. "Laura, we both know there's only one reason you'd go easy on yourself during a workout. Deny it as long as you like, it'll change nothing. \_How long have you been sick?\_" She had Blade over a barrel, and clearly Blade knew it.

"Don't worry about it, Nick." Blade set one hand on her friend's shoulder. "I can deal, I just need to rest up a bit." Her head shot up suddenly, and her dark eyes hardened, though her voice remained nonchalant and carefree. "You go on ahead, I'll catch up."

"You go on ahead, I'll catch up."

As soon as she'd said those words, Laura braced herself for a fight. She'd seen the ODS'Ts moving up, and she wanted Nicole clear. \_If there's going to be trouble, I'm best suited to handle it, in spite of being sick.\_ She wasn't going to kill them, but she certainly wasn't going to allow them to hurt anyone else.

The Spartans turned as an elderly doctor entered the observation area. Silvery-gray, shoulder-length hair was pulled back by a simple brown clip, and blue eyes took in their surroundings with a seemingly unconcerned look. Brushing back the sleeves of a white lab coat, she entered the room while West moved forward to greet her.

"Dr. Gedeon, thank you for coming on such short notice."

"Least I could do. Mind if I commandeer one of these terminals?" At West's nod, the doctor seated herself and programmed the monitor. The display focused into someone's biomonitors, and judging by the look on the doctor's face, it wasn't good.

"Dr. Gedeon? Is something wrong?"

"General, I don't know what you're expecting to hear, but it's not good news."

"Sir," Fred interrupted, "you may want to take a look at this."

They turned to see a squad of Helljumpers attack the lone woman, some trying to rush past her and at her friend. Blade was having none of it: she charged them head on, using her martial arts attacks to disable as many as she could. Yet even to the untrained eyes of Dr. Gedeon, she was tiring rapidly. It was even clearer when she stumbled and couldn't get back up, falling prey to the ODS'Ts and their anger.

"Doctor, what's wrong?"

"Without full lab tests, I can't be sure, but it looks like Mercer's Disease," she whispered fearfully.



Laura felt herself go down, and knew she was in trouble when her body refused to respond. \_I'm screwed\_, was the first thing that went through her head. She felt booted feet beginning to kick her, and knew she was doomed.

Just as she was about to give up, she heard gunfire. Looking up through the mass of legs, she saw a blonde-haired beauty holding a pistol. \_Nick!\_

Nicole Mitchell stood there, a standard-issue sidearm in her hands, and fired three shots into the mass of ODSTs. They looked up in surprise.

"Who the hell do you think you are, interfering with military matters?" one of them bellowed.

The blonde glared at him, and at the others. "I think I'm quite familiar with military policy. And I'm quite sure military policy doesn't include kicking the shit out of a fellow military member."

Unnoticed by anyone not in the observation room, Blade began moving. Obviously Nathan Mitchell had taught his sister how to use a firearm, in case she was attacked, but it was only a matter of time before the Helljumpers rushed her and took her out. Focusing intently on moving, Blade tried to assist her friend. It took all her strength, but she swept her leg out and brought several of her opponents to their knees. Bracing her hands, she pushed herself to her feet.

"Care to try again? Or will you be leaving now?" she murmured, her tone of voice hinting at murder. The Helljumpers took the hint and ran.

"Laura Elizabeth, what in hell do you think you're doing?" Dr. Gedeon shouted, having slipped down to the track after Nicole had started shooting.

"Nice to see you too, Mom," Blade smiled, right before she started wobbling in her place. She caught herself right before she toppled over, bracing herself against the track barrier to stay upright.

"Laura Morisson, I order you to undergo a complete physical examination immediately." Blade smirked wearily.

"Never thought I'd see the day you'd pull rank on me, Mom. Never thought I'd see the day."

"So, Dr. Gedeon, care to explain Mercer's Disease?"

The doctor nodded, and activated a holographic projector. Blade's biosigns came on display, certain areas on her body highlighted in red.

"Mercer's Disease is a muscular disease, and can be fatal if left untreated. Sometimes it can lay dormant for months, other times only days. The first few sign of system collapse is a failure of bodily response in the highlighted areas shown here. Simply put, the human body cannot do as it's told. As we saw earlier, when SPARTAN-000 collapsed, the body simply shut itself down for almost inexplicable

reasons."

"You say this disease is treatable?" West interrupted, concern present in his voice.

"If caught in the early stages, yes, but judging by her current condition she's had Mercer's Disease for almost a month. So unless she's contracted some new strain of the disease, she'll probably be dead in a few days." As she turned away, the Spartans swore they saw tears in the older woman's eyes.

"Laura, how long have you been sick? And don't even think about lying to me."

The woman rolled her eyes, knowing how futile it would be to lie to her mother anyway. We're just too much alike, she mused.

"About a month and a half, actually. I've been nicking epinephrine and other low-grade stims to keep this thing in check." Laura tried to ignore her mother's look of disapproval. "At first I thought it was just a killer head-cold, until the shakes started."

"And why didn't you come to us for help sooner?" Dr. Gedeon nearly shouted. Laura winced.

"Because I nearly had it licked. Once the shakes started, I did some research, found out what I was up against. A friend and I were working on a cure, and we were almost finished with it until I wound up in here." Laura put enough emphasis on the word 'friend' for her mother to catch the reference. Lorienna knows something.

"Ok, then, just rest up. I'll see if I can get a hold of this 'cure' and put it into action, if I can finish it."

"Will do, Mom. I don't think I'm really going anywhere." A weary smirk graced the Spartan's features, long brown lashes fluttered shut, and the woman rested.

Dr. Gedeon examined the formula Lorienna had provided, marveling at the simplicity. Deceptively simple, who would have thought it? She began mixing the compound as indicated, hoping that the theoretical calculations were accurate; if they weren't, Laura was as good as dead.

"Well, what news?" West was impatient for results.

"The formula worked, sir. She's still very weak though, and it'll take some time for a full recovery. I'd like permission to move her back to my home in the outskirts of town; the quiet will help speed her recovery both physically and psychologically."

"If Colonel Ackerson finds out about this, Doctor, he'll have your head."

"Let him. He still needs me alive, as much as he may rant and rave about some of my choices. In any case, I stand firm in my decision." There was a determined glint in Dr. Gedeon's eyes that reminded West of her daughter.

"Very well, Dr. Gedeon. You have my full permission to move Laura

wherever you deem fit for full recovery, for as long as you see necessary." West smirked. "Personally, I can't wait to see Ackerson's face when he hears about this."

The air was mild, and humid for the season. In spite of the fact that it was autumn, Laura felt a sense of renewal, of vitality. \_Maybe it's because I'm recovering,\_ she thought as she walked along the riverbank. A breeze ruffled her dark hair, hanging loose for once rather than in its usual braid. Her bout with Mercer's Disease had left her weaker than a normal human, but it had provided a cure for other patients, which made her suffering seem worthwhile. Each passing day saw her growing stronger, and she guessed that in another week or so she'd be able to return to active duty.

Coming near a grassy stretch on the bank, Laura paused and lay down in the grass. The earthy scent brought a sense of comfort and vitality rushing through her once again. Laura was content to just lay in the grass and rest, the sun kissing her face, the soft sounds of the riverside lulling her into a peaceful oblivion. For a little while, she was able to forget what it meant to be a Spartan, to forget the pain she went through day after day.

The Spartans observed the sleeping woman from a distance, stretched out on her back in the grass, arms behind her head.

"She's showing more improvement than the med teams expected," Fred muttered.

"Maybe, but that may be because she's a Spartan," John replied.

"Spartan or not, how was the doctor able to cure her so quickly?" Will pointed out quietly.

"Good point, but maybe it was something they'd been working on and decided to test out on Blade." John wasn't quite willing to doubt the doctor just yet.

"Maybe, maybe not." Linda was quiet as always, but she had more to say. "If General West trusts her, we should too."

"Does West even know?" Fred murmured.

"Wouldn't surprise me, since he was the one to call Dr. Gedeon in the first place," John muttered.

## 5. Chapter 5: A Friendly Race

Hey all! One more installment for your reading pleasure! Just a quick overview on a couple of terms in here: a bay is one of those red-brown horses with black mane and tail, and a palomino is the gold one with cream colored mane and tail. Beyond that, there's nothing out of the ordinary. Enjoy!

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### 5. A Friendly Race

Laura was almost fully recovered, but she decided to put herself to the test before reporting in. Smiling, she exited her mother's house and headed cross-country to an old family friend. On her way there, she half-imagined she saw a wolf slip away, but knew she probably hadn't—wolves tended to avoid people whenever possible. \_Kind of ironic, really\_, she thought. \_One of the most feared predators prefers to avoid contact unless they have no choice.\_ She felt a kind of kinship with wolves: like them, she was fierce, intelligent, and preferred to avoid most human contact (though not by choice).

Looking up, she mentally jarred herself alert, since her friend's farm was coming up. A smile split her face as she whistled, watching a red-gold dog streak her way.

"Easy, Maddie! Down, girl!" The dog was in no mood to listen, at least not until Laura knelt down and started scratching her behind the ears. She didn't quite know what breed Maddie was, but she'd bet her boots that there was some Golden Retriever/Labrador in there somewhere.

"Okay, slobberchops, you've had your dose of attention, now let's go find your owner." Rising from her crouched position, Laura headed towards one of the barns, Maddie at her heels. She slowed her stride when she spotted an older woman in the aisle.

"Hey, Mrs. Ryder!" The older woman turned, nearly dropping the two feed buckets in her hands.

"Laura! Long time no see! Where have you been?" Setting down the buckets, Mrs. Ryder gave Laura a fierce hug, which Laura gingerly returned.

"Oh, just about everywhere you can imagine," she joked, hoping her friend never found out how true it was.

Mrs. Ryder laughed, a merry sound that made Laura grin even more. "I'm sure you have. Still remember what I taught you about horses?"

"How could I forget? 'Sides, I figured I could use the exercise when all was said and done." The two women shared a smile.

Laura was very busy over the next few hours cleaning saddles, filling feed buckets, and mucking out stalls. It was hard work, but surprisingly enjoyable: there was a stronger sense of completion in cleaning a horse's stall than there was in completing a dangerous mission, at least in her mind. \_The simple things in life\_, she thought. Finally, though, she was able to go out into the pasture and watch the horses graze.

"Still not riding anymore?" Mrs. Ryder asked as she came up beside her.

"I can't anymore; I got too heavy when I turned fourteen, and I haven't been able to shed the weight." Laura hated the fib, but in a sense it was also the truth.

"Laura, these horses can handle a lot of weight, as long as it's not for a long amount of time. In fact, I'd say they could probably carry

a 300-pound rider for a fifteen-twenty minute ride."

"I just don't care to risk it. I don't want to hurt them, because once you do you lose their trust forever." A small smile touched her lips. "I can try to race them, though."

Mrs. Ryder returned the smile. "Yes, I remember when you were much younger. You'd always try to run with Corona, my fastest mare, and you'd always lose."

"Hey, I'd rather lose to a horse than a human. Horses usually don't hold it over you."

"Speaking of which, you feel up to racing Mariah? She's all grown up now, and as I recall she was quite fond of you."

Laura smiled, remembering the golden foal with black mane and tail: an odd color combination, but when the father was a bay and the mother was a palomino that tended to happen. "I think I can handle it."

"Hey, Mariah." Laura reached up to rub the mare's ears. Mariah lowered her head and nudged Laura's shoulder with her nose.

"Looking for a treat, I take it?" Laura giggled as she produced an apple, smiling as the horse consumed it with relish. Mariah nickered gleefully, nudging her shoulder again in hope of more.

"Oh no, no more apples. I have a better treat in mind." She leaned closer, whispering almost conspiratorially in the golden ear. "Feel up to a run?"

Laura thanked the heavens that she hadn't actually entered the pasture: Mariah reared up, pawed the air, and jumped over the fence, the attitude apparently being \_just try and stop me\_. More than up for the challenge, Laura shot off, Mariah matching her stride for stride.

To the outside observer, it would appear that a wild-woman and a horse were racing each other across open flats. The reality was actually quite similar: Laura had taken many concepts from watching the horses run in the fields and applied them to her own life. It had helped her build her speed and endurance, but it always helped to race on of her four-legged friends. She and Mariah were fairly evenly-matched, but secretly Laura guessed the mare had even more wells untapped.

The flats were ending, horse and human were approaching a rocky outcropping of hills. Scrambling on all fours, she and Mariah reached the top at the same time. The mare simply stood and watched Laura with intelligent eyes as she tried to catch her breath.

"It's been a while, Mariah, but it was worth it," she spoke in between breaths. Mariah nudged her human companion, almost seeming to ask \_what next?\_

"Just let me catch my breath and we'll race back." Mariah snorted in what seemed a horsy gesture of disapproval. Butting her golden head on Laura's shoulder, the horse was plainly trying to convince her not to run.

"So you don't think I can keep up with you? Not on my own two feet?" Laura smiled. "Well, Mariah, that's going to be the only way I'm getting back."

Mariah tossed her black mane and reared; if she were to start screaming \_NO\_ she couldn't have been plainer. Trotting partway down the hill, the mare turned and looked steadily at Laura.

"I can't ride you, I'm too heavy," she protested. "You'll only get hurt."

One shod hoof stamped on rock, one loud snort voiced Mariah's reply. \_Shut up and get on\_, her dark eyes seemed to say, accompanied by a hoof stamping in impatience.

Laura shook her head, a resigned smile on her face. "Ok, but don't say I didn't warn you." Pausing for a moment, Laura pulled the band out of her hair and shook it out of its long braid. When it was hanging loose around her head, she mounted on Mariah's back as easily as she had many years ago, before the augmentations had made her too heavy for Corona to carry. A tear formed at the corner of her eye as she thought about the gentle mare, who had had to be put down many years ago.

Her thoughts were jarred abruptly when Mariah reared up slightly, came down, and started down the rocky slope. Once they reached the flats she broke out into one of the fastest gallops Laura had ever seen, let alone experienced. Her black mane whipped out behind her, mingling with a few strands of Laura's own dark hair. Laura crouched low along the horse's back, fingers tangled in strands of coarse mane, movements blending with Mariah's almost as if both were one creature.

They raced on, through the flats and back to the farm. Mariah saw how close it was and picked up speed.

"Mariah!" Laura saw the pasture fence coming closer, but the mare wasn't swerving. Gathering her powerful hindquarters, she jumped the fence and kept going, gradually slowing from gallop to canter, canter to trot, trot to walk. When she finally stopped, Laura dismounted and buried her face in Mariah's golden neck.

"I take it you had a good run?" Laura turned and smiled, seeing Mrs. Ryder's beaming face.

"The best!"

## 6. Chapter 6: PissedOff Outlaw

Howdy! Thanks to everyone who's commented--feel free to be critical, I won't bite! ;D Anyway, this was kind of a "what-if" that didn't go in for obvious reasons. I'll let you find out why yourselves. Enjoy!

Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

## 6. Pissed-Off Outlaw

Linda happened to be walking past an open locker room when she heard what sounded like raised voices. Pausing near the open doorway, she listened to the argument that was going on.

"I don't trust that damned rule book as far as I could throw it!" An angry female voice shouted at someone Linda couldn't see. Inching around the corner, she spotted Blade, red-faced and screaming at someone just out of her line of sight. "Rules and regulations are all well and good until they get somebody killed! How can you not see that, you of all people?"

"The rules were made for a reason," a harsh voice shot back, the familiar gravelly tones prompting no small amount of surprise. Spotting Fred and Will approaching, she motioned them to silence as they continued listening.

"Well, you want to know what you can do with your fucking rules?" Blade screamed. "Playing by the book is completely useless out there. That damned rule book was based on Earth wars and Earth strategies, and against the Covenant those don't apply. Why do you think we're getting our asses handed to us? It's not just because of their advanced technology, it's because we're thinking by human rules!"

"Talk like that is going to get you killed, one way or the other. If you're going on a mission with us you're playing by the rules, you'll follow the chain of command, do you understand?"

"Shove it, Master Chief. You make me sick," Blade's voice, while still furious, suddenly sounded lower and more dangerous. "You and your talk of doing the right thing, following the regs, blindly putting your faith in someone whose only using you, you make me want to puke." She edged closer, her face inches away from the Chief's, and a lesser man probably would've flinched at the proximity. "You and the other Spartans probably wouldn't know the right thing even if it came up and kicked you in the ass!"

There was a loud smacking sound, and Blade fell to the floor, one hand to her face. They couldn't see the Chief's face, but they didn't need to in order to know he was pissed. The fact that he'd lost his temper and actually hit someone was proof enough.

"Insult my teammates again and you'll get more than that," he muttered dangerously.

"Truth hurts, doesn't it?" she shot back, getting to her feet, a look on her face that probably would have scared any other person. "You're what ONI made you to be: you'll do whatever they tell you, no matter how screwed up it is. What's it going to take for you to finally figure it out?"

"You want to know what finally clued me in?" she continued, hands clenched angrily near her combat knives; no doubt she was seriously considering using the weapons. "Want to know when I stopped following the damn rules? It was when they sent me to blow that cruiser on my own, when I rescued those twenty-five prisoners. Had I followed the rules, a bunch of innocent men would have died. I would have murdered them for the sake of a Covenant warship." She spat the words out with such venom that Linda was surprised she was still

standing; had it been anyone else, John probably would have killed them by now.

"You broke the rules to save lives? Had it ever occurred to you that more lives could have been lost because of your actions?" He was getting mad again, Linda could tell.

"We were in a glassed system, numbnuts," Blade shot back, the obvious insult missing its mark. "It was just me, five Covie cruisers, and the prisoners. And since I was going to blow the cruisers anyway, it didn't really matter. As it was, I still didn't save all the prisoners." A cold fury smoldered in her dark eyes. "Turns out there were prisoners on each and every one of those fucking cruisers. I let them die, all to complete a mission, then came back and got hit with a court-martial because I \_rescued\_ a bunch of soldiers."

"You didn't follow the regs. People who do that get other people killed. If every soldier in the UNSC acted like you we'd all be dead by now!"

"Oh shut up, damn you!" Blade screamed, more furious than they'd seen yet. "When you're out there, on your own, knowing that whatever you do doesn't even matter to the people you're serving, the rules don't apply. Nothing out there matters except you, the enemy, and survival: play by the rules under those conditions and you're fucked." She was back in his face, practically shouting right into his ears; even at her current distance Linda couldn't help but wince, and wondered how John could stand it. "The Covenant aren't going to play fair, nine times out of ten I'm facing off with them on my own, and if beating them means going outside the lines, so be it. So until you finally figure out what happens when you're on your own in hostile territory, you can take your fucking rules and regulations and shove them up your ass!" She tried to barrel past him, but he caught her arm.

"We're not done here," he muttered.

"Oh no?" Bringing her foot back, she kicked him—"hard. He didn't have the chance to block the kick, or the elbow that whipped around into his shoulder, and found himself on the floor looking up at her through watery eyes.

"See what happens when you play by the rules? You get hurt." Stepping over him, smirking angrily as she watched him try to get up, Blade exited the room.

\_"Back off, I'll take you on/ Headstrong, I'll take on anyone. I know that you are wrong/ Headstrong, you're headstrongâ€¦|\_"

The music pounded in her ears as Laura ran, feet hitting the track with more than her usual fervor. Her body practically screamed at her to stop, but she knew she needed to keep going: as angry as she was, her stopping would be hazardous for everyone's health. The right side of her face was still stinging, and there was a pretty decent splotch of red where he'd back-handed her; she knew that because she'd glanced in a mirror before she'd hit the tracks. \_Not that I'd ever tell him, but that was a nice hit.\_ Still pounding the track, she never even glanced up when she heard someone enter the room.

"Yeah, she's pissed. Very pissed," West's voice filtered in through



the music.

Not even pausing in her stride, she tipped her head in his direction: while she had the music in her ears, she always made sure she could still hear what went on around her. After all, it wouldn't do to be caught with one's pants down.

"You were better than the best/ Stayed a notch above the rest. It was raining in heaven when you went downâ€¦"

The music had switched abruptly from Trapt to Pat Benatar: Outlaw Blues was suddenly replacing Headstrong. It didn't bother her, though: Pat Benatar had some pretty intense music.

"â€¦ paint you as a modern Robin Hood. It's high noon everywhere you go/ And the guilt you feel is the weary soul (yeah)/ Of the outlaw. Hearts were made to be ruled/ And rules were made to be brokenâ€¦"

West was waving her over; slowing to a jog, Laura came to a stop right in front of him, one hand pausing the music so she could converse easily.

"Welcome to hell on earth, General. What can I do for you?"

"You can tell me what happened to your face, for starters." The look he gave her clearly indicated both his displeasure and how much he already knew.

"Apparently you already know what happened, so why are you asking?" she replied shortly; she was still mad, and the fact that West wasn't happy spelled no good.

"I wanted to hear your side of it before I took action."

"Okay, fine. You want to know what happened?" Laura shot out, her temper rising once again to dangerous levels. "Your precious Master Chief took me to task for the way I handle my missions. He came up after one of my workouts and started telling me off without so much as a by your leave. And when I basically told him to shove off, we got into an argument, I got hit, end of story." One hand clenched into a fist, and it took her a lot of effort to uncurl it.

"'End of story?' I don't think so," West shook his head. "A Spartan's self-control is legendary. The fact that he lost it so completely tells me you hit below the belt with something you said."

"He had it coming," Laura scowled. "He had no right to take me to taskâ€¦that's ONI's job, not his." She turned her back and stalked away. A few Marines stared at her face, but one look was enough to shut them up before they even started.

West looked after Laura's retreating back. She and the Master Chief don't seem to be hitting it off very well, he mused. Either that, or there's something else going on that they don't realize. Shaking his head, he turned and headed back to his office.

Whew! Sorry about the delay, things have been busy lately. Anyway, this scene kinda deals a bit with Lorienna's background. Looking back, though, it didn't make much sense, but I'm posting it anyway! Enjoy!

Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

## 7. A Few Confusing Secrets

Laura had been cornered by both Cortana and Lorienna during her work on a shield generator. Her workshop was able to handle two AIs, and since those two were becoming fast friends, she supposed Lorienna would have told her. \_She's not cautious enough sometimes, but then again, she knows what she's doing\_, Laura mused.

"Blade, do you mind if I ask a question?" Cortana's voice drifted around the room.

"She doesn't like that name, Cortana," Lorienna interrupted, a frown on her features; privately Laura thought she looked much better than her own reflection.

"It's alright, Lorienna, how could she be expected to know? Besides, maybe it's best that she continue referring to me as Blade until the mission's over. This way ONI won't be too suspicious of where she's been going." Laura tipped a wink to the mischievous AI, whose blue color warmed to a faint pink and cooled back to blue.

"Anyways, Cortana, what was your question?"

"How were you able to create Lorienna without ONI's knowledge, and how were you able to keep her secret all this time?" Laura paused in her work and stared at the shields; when she spoke, her voice was quiet.

"I hope this conversation doesn't plan on leaving this room, otherwise you'll learn nothing from me."

"I wouldn't dream of saying a word. Besides, who would believe me?"

"ONI might," Laura frowned, wondering what she was getting herself into. She shook her head and began to relate her tale.

"When I was about fifteen, I realized it was getting harder to keep up with everything going on in ONI's networks, there was so much information pouring in with the war and all. I realized I needed help, and I needed a friend I could talk to from time to time. Unfortunately, I couldn't exactly go and admit to hacking in ONI's systems, and certainly I had no friends of my own to talk to, being on base all the time except for the occasional mission. One day I decided to getâ€¦shall we sayâ€¦creative.

"I'd found this bunker about six years earlier, in 2520. ONI had modified it from a fall-out shelter to an underground facility and promptly forgotten about it once their project failed, so I figured it would be a good place to work. It was dicey trying to fool the cameras all the time, but somehow I managed it when I really needed to get my ass down here. One of those times, I thought about trying

to make an AI of my own, without doing anything overly dangerous. My original plan was for something along the lines of a simple computer program: clever, fast, and fairly easy to create. I got started using a standard computer terminal, laid out the parameters for a basic hacking program, and used a sophisticated profiling system to put some of my wit in the program as well. Figured it'd give the program an edge in the hacking it'd be doing." She paused and shook her head, unsure as to how to go on.

"I'm not entirely sure what I did next, or how it happened. All I know is that somehow, however I managed it, I was able to create a smart AI while avoiding the usual methods; I'd made a smart AI and put more of myself in than I'd ever intended, so now I see a smarter, sneakier version of myself. My personality, my memories, everything was in there, and she grew at a speed I'd never anticipated. Hell, she even modeled her appearance after me, although somewhere along the way she must have improved in natureâ€"she looks a helluva lot better than I ever did." Lorienna 'blushed' faintly at that.

Cortana interrupted. "You said you created her when you were fifteen? And how old are you now?"

"I'm just a shade under 41," Laura replied. "That's the other reason I kept quiet. Somehow I managed to craft an AI that can survive longer than seven years without losing functionality. And I had no idea how I did it, I still don't. Could you imagine me trying to explain that one to ONI? For one thing, they'd never believe it, and if they did they'd try to take Lorienna away. They'd probably strip her programming to find out how she lasted this long, so they could improve the lifespan of their own AIs."

If Cortana had been human she probably would have fainted. As it was, the expression on her holographic features was priceless. \_Lorienna is almost 30 years old! How is that possible?\_ "How did she survive?"

"Again I don't know. In all honesty, I was expecting to have her around for only seven years. When she outlived my expectations, I gave up trying to guess at her operational lifespan. Somehow I get the feeling that the only thing to kill her would be deletion, and I won't let that happen." Laura's face set in a grim determination.

## 8. Chapter 8: Gentle Persuasion

Hey all! Hopefully this next addition's up to scratch. I couldn't quite get this one right for the main, though. Enjoy!

Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

### 8. Gentle Persuasion

Laura was rummaging through the bag Nicole had given her before they left Earth, hoping to find some normal clothes. \_Please say she put a workout suit in here, I've gotta get out of this armor!\_ Her hand brushed something soft, and she pulled out a carefully folded blue workout suit. There was something hard in the center of the folds, and she was able to guess from the contours of the shape as to what

it was. \_Bless you, Nick\_, she thought with a smile. Checking to see no one was watching, she slipped off the bridge, down a corridor and into a side room, where she began pulling off her Mjolnir armor bit by bit. Slipping into the blue workout suit, she picked up the panpipes that had reposed in its folds and began to play. She was reasonably sure the room was far enough away to not attract the Spartans' attention, but was more than a little surprised when a contingent of Grunts waddled up; unperturbed, she kept playing, encouraged when they didn't shoot her.

The Spartans were busy resting and checking equipment when Will looked around. "Where's Blade?"

"Hell if I know," Fred muttered.

"Cortana, where did she go?" The Master Chief asked. Cortana's holographic figure faded into view, and she appeared lost in thought as she scanned the ship.

"Chief, you wouldn't believe me if I told you," she said, wide-eyed at whatever she was seeing.

"Then show me." Cortana nodded, and a holographic display came on. The Spartans could see Laura sitting calmly in a blue outfit, her armor removed and lying in a neat pile behind her. She seemed completely unaware that she was surrounded by Grunts, who were just sitting there and listening to the sound of the panpipes she was playing. Surprisingly, not one of them tried to shoot her.

"What the hell? They're not attacking," Will whispered in quiet amazement.

"Does she even know they're there?" Fred asked.

As if in answer to his question, Laura stopped playing and looked at the Grunts, an expression of pity on her face. She held out her hand, but none of them moved. Shaking her head, she lifted the panpipes back to her lips and began a new melody, soft and sad, like someone crying out in despair. Entranced by the sad beauty of her music, several more Grunts came waddling around the corner, stopping short when they saw a human creating that lonely melody.

Laura saw the Grunts coming near the doorway, held out her hand, and motioned them nearer. She wondered why none of them were attacking, but it didn't matter. \_Maybe I've found a way to connect with the Covenant,\_ she thought. Lifting the panpipes again, she played a new melody, one she had played twice before: the song she had played at her grandmother's funeral. She was so entranced by the music, as it coursed through every fiber of her being, that she never noticed the camouflaged Elite that was watching her play, not until he came closer. Stopping her melody, she looked straight at the Elite,

"You may as well deactivate your cloak. I can see you there," she spoke calmly. "I also know you're an observer, no doubt sent to check on these little ones. As you can see, no harm has come to them. And as long as they are willing and do as they're asked, no harm will come to them from me." Replacing the panpipes, she continued to play her sad song.

After a time, she changed the melody, knowing that if the Elite was

still nearby she might be able to send a message. Playing through the new song twice, she lowered the pipes and began singing, softly but clearly:

\_Shalom chaverim, shalom chaverim, \_

\_Shalom, Shalom. \_

\_Le hit thraot, le hit thraot, \_

\_Shalom, Shalom. \_

Having sung in a language none of the Covenant would have expected, she switched from Hebrew to English:

\_Peace my friends, peace my friends, \_

\_Peace, Peace. \_

\_We'll see you again, we'll see you again, \_

\_Peace, peace. \_

Laura smiled at the Grunts and changed melodies again, keeping the notes soft and sad, never noticing the Elite in the shadows move away. She had puzzled them as she'd guessed she would.

The Spartans stared at the viewer as the camouflaged Elite walked away, leaving the Grunts sitting and listening to the Spartan as she played. They stared even more when one Grunt, bolder than the others, approached and sniffed. Laura paused in her playing, held out her hand, and smiled kindly when it took her hand in its claw. The other Grunts moved closer, and Laura greeted each of them in turn.

"I don't believe it," Fred whispered in amazement.

## 9. Chapter 9: Alternate Christmas

Hey guys! Thanks again to everyone who's left reviews, and I apologize in advance for this next scene. This is the original draft for the christmas parties in Secret Spartan. Unfortunately, it came out kinda...cheesy. Oh well, stuff happens, right? Enjoy!

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### 9. Christmas Surprise

"Hey, Laurabeth! How goes it?"

"Same old, same old. Anyway, I have a surprise for you. Close your eyes and let me lead you." With that, she grabbed his hand and led him outside the base, where Nicole and Taylor were waiting with their eyes closed. Leading Nathan almost up to Nicole completely, Laura dropped his hand, got out of the line of sight, and yelled "Ok, open!"

"Daddy!" Taylor ran up and shrieked in delight as her father scooped

her up and hugged her tightly. Nicole followed at a more sedate pace, and when she got there Nathan wrapped one arm around her waist and dropped a kiss on her forehead.

"Nathan, I'm glad you're home," Nicole said, eyes shining as she looked at her brother.

"Good to be home. I just arrived a few weeks ago; the Spartans brought me back in the middle of one of their ops. Laura found out I was here and—" he stopped and looked around. "Where did she go?"

"I think we'll see her later, Nathe. There's a Christmas party tonight, and a lot of people will be there, including her."

"And the Spartans?"

"I'll extend a special invitation just for them," Nicole smiled, but her clear eyes clouded with a silent wish of her own. \_Alex, where are you?\_

Laura stood in a corner at Nicole's, silent and watchful. There were a lot of ONI officers here, each one a potential threat, but it was Ackerson she had to watch out for most. He'd come with General West, and Nicole had been decidedly uncomfortable about letting him in, but too polite to turn him away. As she stood brooding on this and various other things, she noticed Nathan heading her way.

"There you are! Why are you hiding in a corner when you could be dancing?"

"I haven't had any cause to dance for a long time, Nathe," she replied, a slight smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"Well, why don't you start now?" Nathan held out his hand, and Laura took it. \_If nothing else, it might piss off Ackerson,\_ she thought. A lively Christmas tune came on the speakers, and the two began to dance along with several other couples.

The Master Chief felt a pang of jealousy as he watched Laura dancing with Lieutenant Mitchell, something he hadn't felt since childhood. \_Why am I jealous?\_ He and the others watched as Nathan tried to move closer to her. It was like watching him try to catch smoke; whenever he got close enough to touch her, she slipped away at the last minute, keeping the rhythm of the music while not letting him get too close. When he finally caught her, they could tell it was only because she allowed it.

"Oh, look, mistletoe," they heard Nathan mutter as he leaned his face closer to hers. Laura waited until his face almost touched hers, then kissed him—"on the tip of his nose. General laughter ensued, Nathan Mitchell turned a dark red, and Laura slipped out of his arms and headed for the punch bowl.

Laura took her punch and slipped back to her corner, finding the guest she'd been waiting for. The young Marine had one arm in a cast, but he seemed more worried about his appearance; he kept running a hand over his tousled blond hair.

"I figured you'd show up, once I dropped that message on your

footlocker," Laura muttered. "I think everything's set to go, are you ready?"

Alex Young raked his hand through his hair one more time. "What if she doesn't see me?" He was nervous about having to rely on a woman everyone called a traitor.

"Leave that to me. Just plant yourself near the mistletoe and wait for it." Laura slipped back among all the people dancing again, boogying with Nicole to 'Jingle Bell Rock.'

"Hey, Nick, I see a handsome young man under the mistletoe."

"So? Go kiss him yourself." Nicole assumed it was the Master Chief, and didn't even bother to look.

"I would, except for one problem: he fancies you!" Laura grabbed her friend and pushed her firmly towards the mistletoe and into the waiting arms of Alex Young, who lost no time in kissing his girlfriend.

The Spartans watched in surprise as Laura pushed Nicole to a Marine, and their jaws nearly dropped when they saw the two kissing under the mistletoe. Laura had obviously planned this whole thing, but why? The answer came clearly as the music shut off, and Alex Young got down on one knee.

"Nicole, I know the timing is awful, but I can't wait any longer. Will you marry me?" he asked as he held up a diamond ring. Nicole's shining eyes were answer enough as she took the ring and slipped it on her finger. As the Spartans gazed at the scene, they saw Laura edging away from the scene; a closer look revealed a single tear running down the side of her face. \_Why is she crying?\_ Linda thought. None of them had ever seen any emotion from her other than cold anger. Now they realized she was trying to slip away unseen, but that wasn't to be: Nicole spotted her edging towards the door.

"I think it's safe to say we're going through with this as soon as we can, and I already know who my maid of honor is going to be: my best and truest friend."

"And who might that be?" a slightly amused Alex asked.

"Laura Morisson, the most wonderful friend anyone could ever ask for!" The Spartans noticed Laura turn a beautiful shade of pink at this announcement, but her embarrassment was short-lived as a bundle of red-gold started streaking around the room.

## 10. Chapter 10: Curious Commandos

Hey all! Thanks again to my loyal readers for putting up with all these! I promise this one's better than the last one--almost made the grade, but I couldn't quite figure out how to work it in. Enjoy!

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## 10. Curious Commandos

The unique team of five had captured a Covenant frigate single-handedly, almost. Once they'd put Cortana into the ship's systems, she'd taken care of a lot of things in there, and bought them time to get to the bridge. They were just preparing to jump into Slipspace when an alarm panel began to blare.

"What the hell is \_that\_?" Fred shouted.

Laura was by the panel in an instant. "Boarding craft just hit us. They're attached to the hull, looks like they're trying to burn through."

"Cortana, how soon before they get in?" the Chief asked.

"Judging by the thickness of Covenant hulls and their cutting tools, about twenty minutes."

"More than enough time," Laura muttered, pulling a few satchel charges out and prepping them. "Where are they at?"

"Level 12, about two levels down and three compartments over," Cortana stated. After a brief pause, she asked, "You're not seriously thinking of going out there, are you?"

"No, I'm going to sit here and let them take back this ship. What do you \_think\_ I'm going to do?" Laura's tone was sharp, and very sarcastic. "Once I blow the ship, jump out and we'll be home free."

"I'm with you. Fred, Will, Linda, guard the bridge. Don't let the Covenant take it back." Three heads nodded assent, and the two remaining Spartans moved to the airlock.

Once they reached the airlock, Laura stopped and turned to look at the Master Chief.

"You should go back. It's too dangerous for both of us to go."

"It'll be more dangerous for you to go alone. I'm not letting you go by yourself."

Laura grimaced, knowing what she had to do. Bracing herself, she struck out quickly, a strong right cross catching the Chief in the helmet. While he was still disoriented from the blow, she attached a neural inhibitor (which she carried three of just in case) to his armor's AI port, activated it, and shoved him back through the airlock.

Cortana and the other Spartans saw what she'd done via the ship's security monitors. Fred opened a com channel, more than ready to give Blade a piece of his mind.

"What the hell did you just do? Attacking a fellow soldier!"

"I have my orders, Spartan. All four of you SPARTAN-II's are supposed to return alive. I intend to follow them to the letter." She crawled out of the airlock and launched herself over the ship's hull.



"Were those really your orders?" Cortana whispered on a private channel.

"No, and if you tell him that, I'll come back as a ghost and not rest until I erase you." There was no threat to her words, and both of them knew it.

Laura killed the channels as she sailed closer to the boarding craft, activating a camouflage generator that had become part of her standard equipment package. Finally managing to touch down and crawling across the hull, she saw the shapes of space-suited Elites waiting to burn through. Fools, she smiled grimly as she planted the charges. Moving away, she pressed the detonator, and watched as the ship exploded. Unfortunately, it also left her with about five angry Elites who had been missed by the initial blast, and all of them were ready to have her head. She switched off her camo to save power, grabbed her assault rifle and began firing.

"Cortana, jump out now!" She ducked as a plasma bolt flew past her head, pivoted sideways to avoid a second shot, and kept firing.

"Negative. You're still outside the ship. Radiation exposure would reach lethality inâ€|"

"Damn the radiation! I said JUMP! That's an order!" She continued firing, hoping to at least kill some of the Elites. The impact of her bullets sent two of them spinning off the hull, in effect killing them from suffocation when their air ran out. Unfortunately for her, her air supply was also dwindling: the combined exertion of launching herself across the ship's hull and dodging weapon's fire from three angry Elites had caused her to use most of her oxygen. She knew she was dead, but she kept going anyway, stubborn to the last.

"Cortanaâ€|" she gasped as she saw an Elite approaching.  
"â€|jumpâ€|nowâ€|"

As unconsciousness began to claim her, she swore she saw bullets hit the approaching Elites, felt hands grip her and pull her along, then the world went black.

"Cortana, did the UNSC really give her those orders?" Fred shouted, angry at both Blade's defiance and at the orders she'd supposedly been given.

"Not as far as I know. Unless someone gave her separate instructions, her orders are the same as yours," Cortana replied.

They realized then that Blade intended to go it alone; after that, the Spartans wasted no more time. Fred had Will stay behind while he and Linda headed for the airlock. The Master Chief was still lying where he'd been shoved minutes before, unable to move while the inhibitor was in place. Fred removed it and pulled him upright.

"What the hell got into her? She just hit me and then did this?" In the Chief's mind, Laura's actions were treason; they also bothered him for another, very different, reason.

"She said she had orders to bring us back alive, but I don't buy it one bit." Fred was starting to wonder about the mysterious Blade. Ever since their first mission together, he'd found her to be more of an enigma than at first glance: while she seemed to be arrogant, uncontrollable, and (for lack of a better term) dumb, he noticed now that she only used those to keep people guessing so they couldn't get the better of her. He also noticed that the Chief seemed to have a bit more of an interest in Blade than was expected. In effect, the woman confused him, and from the looks of things had confused the Chief as well.

"How long do you think we have before she blows the boarding craft?" Linda asked, giving her sniper rifle a quick check to make sure it was in working order.

"Probably not very long. Let's go." Fred and Linda nodded, and the three Spartans moved through the airlock. It wasn't too hard to spot the boarding craft, since it exploded while they were still heading towards it. Unfortunately, the explosion also highlighted Laura's position for the remaining Elites nearby. In what seemed a rare moment of insanity, Blade turned off her active camo, giving them an even better shot at her as she tried to take on five Elites at once. They heard her voice over the COM.

"Cortana, jump out now!" They watched her dodge plasma fire, still firing at the enemy. "She'll never survive" ran through each of their minds as they continued to advance.

"Negative. You're still outside the ship. Radiation exposure would reach lethality inâ€¦"

"Damn the radiation! I said JUMP! That's an order!"

The Spartans were close enough to see the flash of weapons fire up ahead. Linda stopped and began firing; her sniper rifle picked off two Elites that Laura had sent spinning off the hull. She held her position as Fred and the Chief moved forward. The Chief linked up with Laura's biosigns: her heart rate was accelerated, and she was breathing too rapidly. Her air supply was dangerously low, but she still kept going. She kept firing as the three remaining Elites got closer.

"Cortanaâ€¦jumpâ€¦nowâ€¦" they heard a gasp over the COM. They were close enough; Fred took the Elite in the lead, while John hit a second. The third one brought his rifle to bearâ€¦and dropped it as a 114mm slug penetrated his skull. Once the Elites were neutralized, the two of them grabbed Laura and pulled her back toward the airlock. Linda was waiting for them, keeping an eye out for potential hostiles. Verifying that the area was clear, she nodded and the three of them cycled through, Laura draped over the Chief's shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"Cortana, jump to Slipspace. Everyone's accounted for."

"I can see that," an amused voice replied over the COM. "Entering Slipspace."

Laura came to on the bridge, which had once again become the de facto headquarters for the Spartans. Unsure whether or not she was a prisoner, she kept her eyes shut and her face impassive, listening to

the sounds around her. \_Those are human voices, but does that mean Spartans or other prisoners?\_

"Could she really have given us a direct order?" \_Will's voice, but what are they talking about?\_

"Technically, no. According to the files Lorienna passed me, there was apparently a recommendation for her to be promoted to Lieutenant, but the recommendation was filed away without even being considered, as were all the citations Laura earned during her military career."

"Citations?" Linda asked, remembering the amount of medals she and the other Spartans had pinned to their dress uniforms.

"Yes. According to ONI's records, Laura has earned as many citations as any other member of the SPARTAN program, but none of them have ever been awarded. As far as the UNSC is concerned, her services are basically free."

Laura couldn't keep quiet any longer; opening her eyes, and seeing her helmet still on, she let out one of her usual smartass quips. "Meaningless awards for a meaningless soldier: that's all there is to it," she murmured, feeling incredibly drained by the effort. \_Damn, I don't think I've ever been this tired in my entire career.\_ "Hard to praise someone who doesn't exist, isn't it?"

"Probably," Cortana replied without thinking. Once she realized who had spoken, her cool blue color tinged slightly pink in embarrassment. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Just dog-tired," Laura replied as she tried to sit up; it felt like she was moving through molasses. One of the Spartans walked over and helped her to a sitting position; judging by the sniper rifle, it was Linda.

"Try not to move," the Spartan said quietly. "You're suffering from oxygen deprivation."

"No kidding," Laura replied dryly, her sarcastic attitude apparently unfazed by her brush with death. "Happens when you go on a zero-gee op."

"Why did you go out alone?" she heard the Chief ask; she was glad her helmet was still on, as she could feel the blush growing on her face.

"I had my orders. You were to come back in one piece, all four of you. Since there was no guarantee on nailing the boarding craft, I figured I'd be best suited to deal with it." A wry tone edged into her voice, even as she tried to feed them the lie. "It was a fifty-to-one shot I'd make it out, but I figured fifty-to-one wasn't too bad, all things considered. What I hadn't counted on was a certain AI's refusal to obey orders." Cortana went pink again at that.

"Blade, you really are a bad liar," Fred's voice declared. "Those orders were false, and everyone could tell. No one ever gave you those orders, did they?"

Laura didn't feel like arguing at the moment; in fact, what she really wanted to do was sleep, but she knew better than to nod off. "We'll discuss that later. In the meantime, where the hell are we?"

"We're en route to Earth, following the Cole protocol of course," Cortana answered. "ETA is approximately 15 hours. Once we near Sol, we'll send the Prowler through and let them know we've arrived. Then we give this thing to the scientists."

"Oh joy." In spite of the helmet, the other Spartans could almost see the sarcastic look on her face. "Ship's secure?"

"As secure as it'll ever get," the Chief replied, noting the effort it was taking Laura to stay in a sitting position.

"Good. While we wait, I think I'll take a look at some of these controls. It's not like I have anything better to do." She tried getting to her feet, but Linda held her down.

"You do have something better to be doing: resting. You overtaxed your limits when you went out there, and you're in no shape to be doing anything at this point." This was definitely a lot more than Linda usually said, so Laura could tell that she meant it.

Laura rolled her eyes, knowing they couldn't see it anyways, but knew she couldn't argue. "Fine, I'll just lay here and be lazy while you do my job."

As she lay down, she noticed one of the Spartans shaking his head. \_Must think I'm crazy,\_ she thought. \_If they only knew the real reason...\_ A few seconds later, she was sound asleep.

"Looks like she's out," Fred commented, noticing her not moving for several seconds. They watched the still form resting there, body curved slightly as she lay on her left side, head on her arms.

"Maybe. She could be faking, too," Linda replied, watching closely. "She didn't seem too happy about resting. Better check to make sure." The Chief nodded, and Linda carefully removed the helmet from the sleeping Spartan's head. \_Definitely out,\_ she noticed, her eyes taking in the closed eyes and faint breathing. As she looked, she noticed something different: the normally scowling face, hardened by years of anger and distrust, had a look of serenity on it that no one would have thought possible for it to have. A few tendrils of dark hair had come loose from her braid, floated gently around her face, and served to accentuate the peaceful look already there. She looked almost content, if the small smile on her sleeping face meant anything. It seemed out of place, since they almost always saw Laura with a scowl on her face, and yet the little smile also seemed to suit her far better than her customary anger. Laura slept on, oblivious to the watchful (and in one case admiring) looks from the Spartans.

"She's definitely sleeping. Must have been the workout she got earlier."

"Good. She'll be better for the rest, and we'll probably need an extra hand later on." Though it seemed at first that he was only

concerned about an extra soldier, Linda almost swore she heard concern in John's voice. Opening a private COM channel, she asked him directly.

"Something wrong?"

"Nothing." \_Too abrupt of an answer for it to be nothing, John,\_ she thought. \_We'll need to have a talk when we get back to Earth.\_

Laura woke up in the middle of the Master Chief's watch, a small smile on her face: she hadn't had one of her usual, creepy dreams, but instead had dreamt of her various exploits along the river near her home. Her smile faded as she finished waking up and registered two things: her helmet was off, and it was the Chief that was watching her so intently.

"We needed to make sure you were really sleeping," he said nodding at the helmet lying next to her head.

"Still don't trust me?" she asked, smirking; oddly enough, the Chief noticed the difference between the contented smile from earlier and the bitter smirk now. Picking up her helmet, she almost put it back on, until she saw the Chief pull his off. \_Ok, what's going on?\_ Looking a little closer at his face, she noticed his eyes held a sad look, something she'd never seen before.

"Why did you go out on your own, Laura?" \_He called me by name, and not Blade!\_ The thought sent a flutter through her heart, but outwardly she was unchanged, or so she thought.

"Earth has more need of you than it does of me, Master Chief. People need heroes, not SpecOps troopers. I'm just a shadow, one nobody sees until it's too late. You're somebody that can give people hope, a symbol, a reason to keep fighting. You and the other Spartans are living proof that the Covenant can be beaten." She didn't realize how her face reflected her unhappiness with the situation, nor did she realize how her eyes lit up when she looked at the Chief.

"Is that all?" He knew better than to ask the question, but he wanted to hear it for himself.

"That's all that can be said," Laura replied after a long pause, refusing to look him in the eye.

John was surprised: she still felt something! Why the elaborate charade then? Why pretend she hated him? Seeing Laura walk past him, he pulled her around and did something he'd wanted to do since that past Christmas: he pulled her close and kissed her deeply. For what seemed all too brief a moment, she didn't resist him, but pressed herself as close as the armor would allow, her cool demeanor giving way to passionate fire. Then she broke away, and John saw something he'd never seen in her eyes, something he never thought he'd see in a Spartan again: fear. Grabbing her helmet, Laura all but ran out of the room. Baffled, he turned around to see Linda watching him.

"Chief, we need to talk."

Laura fled the room as quickly and quietly as she could. Why had she

let him kiss her? She knew it was too dangerous for them to be together, and yet she had allowed him to touch her. And it was more than a physical touch: something about him brought out a part of her she almost never knew existed. He seemed to complete her in some way that no one else could. \_This is dangerous. I need to steer clear of the bridge whenever possible.\_ Laura was thankful that she'd brought very little in the way of gear with her for this op. She wasn't going back on the bridge if she could help it: who knew what would happen if she lost her senses and allowed John more than was safe?

## 11. Chapter 11: A Spartan Scorned

**\*\*WARNING: MATURE CONTENT IN THIS CHAPTER! \*\***Well, now that that's out of the way, here's the next 'deleted scene'. I have no idea where it came from, but it almost made the grade. Enjoy!

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### 11. A Spartan Scorned

Laura happened to wake up in the middle of the night; she was at her mother's house on leave, but her mother had been called to cover an emergency shift, so she'd be alone all night. The moon was shining brightly through her window, glinting off the wooden floor. The scene was so idyllic that she was content to lie there on her stomach, bare skin against the sheets (all her nightclothes were in the laundry), and watch the silvery glow, at least until the sound of someone's footsteps approached. \_What the hell? Who can that be?\_ She quickly closed her eyes as the soft sound of a heavy tread echoed across the floor of her room. Too late she realized that her top sheet was bunched up around her waist, exposing her bare back.

John had slipped out of the base on his own, for reasons he couldn't explain; all he knew was that he had to see the woman who had stolen his heart and then rejected him. It wasn't too hard to get to her mother's house, and even easier to get inside: someone had left the sliding door to the back porch unlocked. Soft-footing it through the house, he finally found Laura's room; whatever he'd been expecting, this wasn't it. The walls were painted a pale shade of violet, a large picture of a musical instrument hung on one wall, and an ornate mirror dominated another. The window faced east, and in the center of the room, one end set against the south wall, was her bed. Laura was sleeping, that he was sure of, but he hadn't expected to see her \_naked\_ beneath her sheets. Sometime during the night the top sheet must have slid down: from the waist up was all bare skin and brown hair glistening in the moonlight.

They hadn't been alone together like this since Christmas, and the memory of their first touch haunted him. He couldn't help himself; moving quietly so he wouldn't wake her, John approached the side of the bed. Her dark hair spilled all over the pillow, partially covered her face, and contrasted sharply with her pale skin. Pale, white scars were visible in the moonlight, reminding him what kind of hells she went through day in and day out; like himself and his friends, she was a Spartan, and had seen her share of action. And yet, there was something different about her, somethingâ€¦special. Gently, he reached out and gripped the sheet, pulling it back over her body, but before he finished he gently brushed his fingers against her back.

\_She's so soft, so warm\_, he thought, just before an iron-hard grip snagged his wrist and yanked him down.

She felt her sheet moving up her back, which had surprised her: most men (she assumed it was a man) would have pulled it down or left it be. When she felt someone caress her back, though, that made her mad. Thankful that she'd decided to play opossum, Laura grabbed the intruder's wrist and yanked; he sprawled across her bed, and she pinned him beneath her, her top sheet tangling around her as she somehow managed to keep it between herself and—\_Oh hell!\_ John looked up at her, dark eyes both surprised and mildly amused at their current situation. Angry with herself for what she saw as her own foolishness, Laura decided the best course of action would be to get him out of the house as soon as she could.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she hissed angrily.

"I wanted to talk to you," John replied, her anger starting to make him just as angry; his anger, however, was ice to match her fire, albeit swiftly melting ice.

"There's nothing to say," Laura snarled, getting angrier by the minute, and trying hard to forget how close he was, that the only things between their bodies were his fatigues and a thin sheet.\_ He looks so darn attractive in the moonlight\_, she thought fleetingly, and got even madder at the thought.

"Oh really?" He moved before she could prepare herself, and rolled her beneath him, both hands pinning her arms, his legs trapping hers, the weight of his body keeping her from moving. The sheet was miraculously still between them, but it had somehow gotten untangled and had been pulled taut over her figure, outlining every curve of her body. Seeing her almost helpless like this touched something inside him, a sense of possessiveness he'd never felt before. He was close enough to see the fire in her eyes, a fire he'd seen many times before when she was pissed at ONI.

"Really. There's nothing to say, so you might as well get out." In truth, she didn't want to send him away, but she had no choice. \_Here I am, trying to save his life, and he's not going! What is it going to take to make him hate me? And when in hell is he going to move his sidearm off of my leg?\_ A few seconds later, she realized he wasn't wearing a sidearm. She tried to get loose, but her body wouldn't respond; it was as if something had paralyzed her, and that only fueled her fury. And yet, she was also slightly amused by their current situation, and didn't realize it was showing on her face.

"I'm not leaving," John hissed, angry at her for her rejection. They were too close, but even if he'd wanted to leave he couldn't; something was keeping him atop her, something was happening to him that he didn't understand. His pants felt uncomfortably tight, and his breath came in shakily as if he'd been running for hours. Laura was still beneath him, and something in her face made him think she was the cause.

"What have you done to me?" \_She has to know something, otherwise why the arrogant look?\_ The fact that she had that knowing smirk plastered on her face really pissed him off.

"I had nothing to do with whatever's turned you on," she shot back, the knowing smirk vanishing to be replaced by one of the dirtiest looks John had ever seen. "I'm certainly not the stuff dreams are made of, much less sexual fantasies. If I've gotten you hard you must be desperate." I do not believe this! He's lying on top of me, he's got himself a hard-on — and he doesn't know what to do with it! The whole situation struck her as almost laughable, except for the man pinning her to her own bed with his body, a fire in his eyes that angered her and enchanted her all at once.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, and I don't care. Just stop whatever twisted game you're playing!" John shouted. She's so beautiful when she's mad. The thought flickered by for an instant, then was gone.

"I don't play games, Spartan!" she shouted back; thank goodness there was no one else around to hear. She saw him flinch, so she made the mistake of hurling more insults. "If you think for even one second I could go out of my way to make myself seem attractive to one of ONI's mindless killing machines, think again! I can think of —"

"Shut up," he growled, voice low and threatening.

"I am not going to shut up!" Laura shouted, really mad now, especially since she'd been interrupted. "I'm not through with you, and there's nothing you can —"

Laura didn't get to finish her sentence; her barbs and angry words had provoked a reaction, but not one she'd expected. John had lowered his mouth on hers and kissed her fiercely while she was still shouting at him; he was angry, and his instincts had taken control. The kiss was rough, fierce, and heated; it swept through both of them, confusing them, blocking out their minds with a loud, primal roar that lasted for a full five minutes. When John finally pulled away, he saw a look in her eyes that mirrored exactly what he felt: anger mixed with desire.

"You shouldn't have done that," Laura whispered angrily; the last time he'd seen that fire in her eyes, she'd incapacitated a squad of Helljumpers for calling her a traitor.

"You shouldn't have pissed me off," he growled, keeping her pinned beneath him.

"Coming here was your first mistake, making me mad was your second," she hissed, her anger and her desire taking control of her senses; managing to pull one arm from his grasp, she yanked him closer and returned his kiss, the anger in her giving her an energy she didn't expect. Forcing his mouth open with her own, she thrust her tongue fiercely against his, gripping his shoulder with a strength that surprised both of them as she deepened the kiss, feeling a sudden primal need connected with her fury. John held her down with one hand, using the other to pull the sheet away from her body. His clothes were still on, but she was naked beneath him, her fiery passion fueled by her rage. Their bodies pressed together, his weight atop hers, his chest against her breasts, his hands pinning her to the bed as he devoured her lips; feeling the contours of her shape only added to his need, as he felt the press of her body through his clothes each time she arched into his kiss, as he ran his calloused hands down her body. She could feel the hardness of his body through



his uniform, angry that only a little bit of cloth still separated them; all sense of self-control had vanished because of her rage, and almost all that remained was raw, primal instinct. He felt her hands wander to his pants, trying to undress him. Keeping his mouth locked with hers, he pulled off his fatigues as quickly as he could, tossing them around the room; there was a loud tearing noise as Laura assisted with the removal of his black, no-nonsense, regulation undershirt. John pulled away briefly to remove his trousers; when he was stripped he came back and pinned her down once more.

Their first sexual encounter was hardly the romantic one Laura had envisioned: there was no tender touch, no soft embrace, no gentle words. Both of them were infuriated with the other, and their anger needed an outlet: it was much too good to be wasted. Their rage fed the lusts inside them, and they threw themselves into the battle eagerly. It was the classic struggle between man and woman: the man trying to dominate, the woman resisting. Laura lay beneath the furious Spartan as he tried to subdue her with angry passionate kisses and heated thrusts of his body against hers, but she returned every angry blow with one of her own, just as strong as his. Rough hands gripped her breasts, and she responded by raking her nails across his back, gasping from the sudden pleasure. He forced himself down, she thrust against him; he pinned her beneath him, she returned the stroke and rolled him beneath her, straddling him, thrusting herself against him as her rage grew with her passion. The same raging fire that filled her was reflected in his eyes: angry, primal desire. She nearly cried out when he gripped her waist and pulled her against him, an iron grip clasp ing her to his chest as he forced himself inside her. Again and again he tried to conquer her, but she refused to submit, meeting him head-on whenever he attacked. Both of them climaxed together, and even though the wild, furious sexual encounter was over, the anger still wasn't spent. They lay glaring at each other, still more furious than either one would have expected. No arguments were forthcoming, however, because when Laura tried to open her mouth John covered it with his, the lustful rage still filling him and giving him energy he'd never felt before. Yanking her tightly against him, he rolled her beneath him and pinned her to the bed with his body, kissing her fiercely, trying to drain his fury. One muscled thigh forced her legs apart, and he felt himself push into her warmth. She didn't shy away, but responded in like kind; her hands raked through his short brown hair as she kissed him, moving her hands to his back and holding him tightly as she thrust up against him.

"What the hell have you done, Blade?" he growled as he thrust down against her, his anger beginning to give way to passion as it ebbed.

"I've done nothing," she whispered fiercely, eyes widening with his thrusts as she threw herself against him, her own anger also nearly spent. A noise of disbelief came from the man above her, soon replaced by a loud cry as he came forcefully inside her. She followed him, gasping in surprising bliss as she felt him enter. A dull ache pounded throughout her lower body, but her rage was gone: she felt weak, tired, and exultant. Then she finally remembered why she'd been angry in the first place, and the reason why brought a cold chill. \_I love him, and now I've put him in danger. What on earth possessed me to kiss him?\_ Then she felt the warmth of the man atop her, felt love beginning to stir in her heart, and made a decision. \_We've had this night, and I'm not going to regret it. But I can't let this happen

again. I have to send him away, somehow. \_She didn't like the thought of parting with him, though, and tried hard not to notice the way his head rested on her shoulder, or the look in his eyes when they met her own.

John had never felt so strange in his entire life: one minute he was enraged with the very woman he secretly loved, the next he was doing things he'd never thought could be done. Now he lay on top of Laura, his anger spent, feeling more worn out than he'd ever felt before. Parts of his body that hadn't been sore in a long time ached, but he felt oddly content. \_What in the hell happened?\_ Lifting his head from her shoulder, he looked down and noticed a smirk on Laura's face; she seemed nearly as tired as he felt, but she also seemed to understand exactly what was going on.

"Congratulations. You are officially a man," she muttered sarcastically.

"And just what the hell is that supposed to mean?" he asked, feeling his anger start to rise again.

"Only that you've finally had a sexual encounter for the first time in your life, and probably the last too." More anger flashed in her dark eyes, but behind it, John almost swore he saw a hint of sadness. Before he could ask her what was wrong, her next words hit him like a hammer blow. " My first one wasn't nearly as much of a workout."

"Your firstâ€" John choked. He couldn't believe it. \_She's done this before?\_

"My first. And I hated every minute of it." Seeing the anger in his face and realizing he'd misunderstood, she looked away; it hurt her to see the hurt in his eyes. \_Well, you were kind of vague\_, she censured herself mentally. "Being raped by a Helljumper at twelve years old isn't exactly my idea of a pleasant experience."

"Is that why you hate them so much?" The feeling of possessiveness strengthened; it was all he could do to keep from leaping up and strangling every ODST in the vicinity.

"One reason of many." She shot him a hard look. "Why do you care anyway?"

"Did it ever occur to you that if I came all the way out here in the middle of the night it was for something besides sex?" he muttered, getting mad again. Laura saw the anger in his eyes and smirked.

"Most guys, that's all they think about." Her dark eyes narrowed. "Why did you come here, anyway?"

"I wanted to talk to you, I wanted some answers." He shook his head, realizing he'd gotten some answers, answers he hadn't expected.

"I don't have any answers for the questions you'd ask," she said softly. \_No answers you'd want to hear, anyway.\_ Some of her regret must have shown through her eyes; John touched her face, the caress a sharp change from their furious embraces.

"Lauraâ€¦" he thought she regretted their time together. "I'm sâ€¦"

She put her fingers to his lips, stopping his words and sending a tremor through his body.

"Don't say anything," she whispered. "I wanted it, you wanted it, we're both at fault." She sighed heavily. "You should probably go."

Realizing she was right, John reluctantly pulled himself off of her. His fatigues had been thrown around the room during their wild time, so he gathered them up one by one and put them on, with the exception of his torn undershirt. As he walked out of the room, something inside of him screamed \_go back, go back\_, but he never did. Behind him he swore he heard the sound of a woman crying, but after a while he was sure he was mistaken; Spartans never cried, especially not Laura.

\_I mean absolutely nothing to him now, because I forced him to hate me\_, Laura thought as she watched him walk away as if nothing was wrong. As soon as he was gone, she turned her head and sobbed into the pillow, trying hard to ignore the scent of his body which still lingered. \_I've had to alienate the one man I truly love.\_ \_Damn ONI for bringing me to this! \_She had wanted so much to tell him the truth when he'd come to her, but fear kept her silent; actually, first it had been fear, then anger, then wild sex, then fear again. Forcing herself to look around, she finally saw the mess: scattered bedclothes, two halves of a black undershirt, and her bottom sheet wet with sweat. \_Yikes. Better try to clean this up before Mom gets back.\_

## 12. Chapter 12: Unforgivable

Howdy! Thanks to all my readers for putting up with these--hopefully your patience will be rewarded down the road! ;D Anyhoo, here's the next segment: kinda goes along with the previous one and explains part of her disgust with ONI and the UNSC. Of course, it didn't quite fit, but stuff happens. Enjoy!

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### 12. Unforgivable

\_"Being raped by a Helljumper at twelve years old isn't exactly my idea of a pleasant time."\_

After she had finally cleaned up the mess from her 'encounter' with the Master Chief, Laura found herself reliving an unpleasant memory, one she had tried hard to forget.

\_It was early spring, a time of renewal and rebirth. She walked through the woods behind Camp Hayes, looking for bird's nests and wildflowers, just for fun. ONI and her instructors had no idea she'd gotten out, so she was expecting to have a long day of relaxation for once.\_

\_She'd just turned toward an oak when she heard a noise behind her.

Whirling around, she saw an ODSST following her. Her fears relaxed, since he was a Marine and not a rebel or drill instructor: she had nothing to fear from him, or so she thought.\_

\_"You shouldn't be wandering around by yourself, kid," he said, his words innocent enough, but something in his voice worried her.\_

\_"There's nothing in these woods I have to worry about," she smiled back trying to hide her unease; the last time she'd been this nervous was on her 'field trip' to Reach. "Wolves and coyotes are the worst things I'm likely to run into, and they're easy to deal with."\_

\_"Oh really?" Without warning, the Helljumper lunged and pinned her to the tree. Throwing her to the ground, he dropped on top of her and tore at her clothes.\_

\_Laura had no idea what was happening, and she had no time to react even if she knew how. Here was a Marine, a fellow soldier, who was attacking her! What should she do? She stopped struggling, knowing she had no chance of escape anyway. The man ripped her jeans off, tore her shirt, and started biting her neck roughly. She felt her underpants being torn away, then her legs were forced apart. Something thick and hard forced itself into her belly, hurting her, making her bleed. She tried to scream, but her attacker covered her mouth with his hand. He raped her twice, knowing she couldn't fight him, and warned her that if she told anyone she'd pay the price. As soon as she could, Laura ran away, crashing through the underbrush to her parents' house.\_

\_"Laura! What on Earth happened to you?"\_

\_"Mommy, please, it wasn't my fault! I didn'tâ€|he made meâ€|he hurt meâ€|help meâ€|make it stop!" She was sobbing incoherently, but from the look on her mother's face, and her father's when he saw her, they knew exactly what had happened.\_

Laura closed her eyes and remembered what had happened after. Her mother had taken her to the base hospital, and one of her co-workers had performed a rape-test. The attacker had gotten off, but her father had been furious, so much so that he'd pulled a gun on the man.

\_"Dad, no. He's not worth a court-martial. Let him go for now."\_

\_"You expect me to just let him go free after what he did to you?" her father shouted; he was angry enough that his hand was shaking, but he kept the weapon trained on the man.\_

\_"We don't exactly have much of a choice." Laura pulled the gun away and holstered it. "If ONI's letting him go, there's nothing we can do. I'll just have to live with it."\_

That had been bad enough, but the worst damage was yet to come. She'd gotten pregnant from the rape, pregnant at the ripe old age of twelve. Worse yet, the child had died inside her, and she had buried her first son when he was born. Only the family knew about the baby, and ONI of course, but she tried to keep it quiet as much as possible. As she got older, Laura had buried the memory as best she

could, but here it was again, all because of John.

The Master Chief, as soon as he got back to the base, got in touch with Cortana: he wanted to know what had happened to Laura all those years ago.

"Hey, Chief, what can I do for you?"

"Cortana, it's important, and a little disturbing."

Cortana's holographic features look troubled. "How disturbing?"

"I need to know if Blade was," he paused, searching for the right words. "If she was attacked when she was twelve."

"Attacked? Or worse?" Cortana began sifting through ONI's database, looking for instances from Blade's past. After a moment, her eyes widened. "Why exactly are you looking for this information?"

"Blade happened to mention it in passing." John looked meaningfully at the AI. "Did you find something?"

Cortana's voice dropped to a whisper. "She was raped, Chief, and ONI let the man go. He was a Helljumper, he raped a twelve-year-old girl, and he got off."

The Chief's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Anything else I should know?"

"There was a pregnancy, stillborn. She lost almost a year of training because of the rape, the pregnancy and the accompanying psychological trauma. Something tells me it still haunts her; that kind of trauma is reputed to have lasting effects."

"And the bastard responsible?" he hissed, obviously planning some kind of revenge.

"Relax, Chief. He's already dead, KIA early on in the war. ONI sent him as part of a SpecOps group and he never made it back."

"Why? Why did they let him go?" John was furious, but he forced himself to remain calm.

"ONI had wiped all of Blade's files as soon as she was conscripted. Officially, she died from illness at the age of four. There was no way to build a case, even if they'd wanted to." Cortana shook her head. "I had no idea, it wasn't in her main file."

"She deserves better," John murmured angrily; the thought that ONI had betrayed her in the worst way really pissed him off. "She deserves a hell of a lot better than that."

### 13. Chapter 13: Memory Madness

Whew! Sorry about the long wait, but it's been kinda busy here. Anyways, this one's a little funky--goes into more detail about the dangers of that wierd circlet they found. You know, the one that acesses memories? Just how bad can things get? Enjoy!

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### 13. Memory Madness

Dr. Gedeon was heading to check on her daughter when she happened to run into Linda. She nodded at the Spartan.

"Good morning, Chief Petty Officer."

"Doctor," Linda replied quietly. She too had been heading to check on Laura, and so she followed the doctor to Laura's hospital room. Unfortunately, none of them were prepared for what they saw: Laura sitting straight up in bed, dark hair sticking up in all directions, eyes strangely out of focus and staring. Her oddly blank, strangely frightening gaze fixed itself on the two, and she began to speak.

\_"Q'a sernos eim chela, Naryse, Corin mornat nu perinrab."\_

"Laura?" her mother stared in shock; the words her daughter was speaking made no sense. \_Either she's delirious or dreaming\_.  
"Laura?"

\_"Your efforts are wasted, Naryse, Corin does not desire."\_

"Laura?" The name punched through the fog clouding her mind, pushing aside the memories that had taken hold; she managed to fight her way clear of the memories and back to the present. Laura saw her mother and Linda in the doorway, and saw her mother's gaze. \_She's worried\_, she realized, and cursed herself as soon as she realized why. She hadn't told her mother everything that had happened onboard the \_Holy Retribution\_, and ONI had no idea she had put on the circlet, unless the Spartans mentioned it in the mission reports (which she doubted, otherwise ONI would've been all over her by now). And she most certainly hadn't mentioned that the memories were beginning to take hold, for fear of alarming anyone else; after all, an insane killing machine wasn't the sort of thing anyone wanted to have around.

"Mom? You ok?"

"Laura Elizabeth, what is wrong with you?" Laura and Linda both winced and shared a look. Linda set one hand on the doctor's shoulder.

"Dr. Gedeon, you should probably sit down. We need to talk."

Two hours later, Laura, her mother, and Linda were heading for West's office, Dr. Gedeon sporting a worried look. Laura's face was a blank wall, but inside was a cold, insipid fear: was she going insane? Linda had told her the words she'd said, words that only she had understood. \_I'm losing my mind\_, ran through her head constantly, a never-ending mantra of doubt and doom. It seemed that the least little thing triggered a memory that wasn't her own. Sometimes all it took was a touch, a glance, or a spoken phrase, and then she suddenly became the long-dead Alaya instead of the enigmatic BLADE. Truth be told, she was scared out of her mind. \_If anyone knew I was scared this badly, they'd never believe it\_, she thought briefly, forcing herself to keep her face blank.

"Dr. Gedeon, Laura, SPARTAN-058, what can I do for you?" West noticed the concerned, frightened look on the doctor's face, and knew Laura well enough to see the fear her body language gave off, in spite of her well-practiced poker face. \_What could possibly rattle Laura, besides ONI?\_ West wondered.

"General, remember the mission report from the \_Holy Retribution\_, the circlet they mentioned?" Dr. Gedeon's voice was shaky and panicked.

"Calm down, Doctor. I remember the report. What about this circlet?"

"Sir," Linda murmured, "Laura put it on."

"She WHAT?" Ackerson bellowed in the conference room, the sound coming close to deafening the occupants; Laura in her wheelchair winced, as much from her injuries as from the tone of his voice. \_Yep, he's pissed\_, she thought.

"Blade put on thatâ€¦thatâ€¦\_device\_, and never mentioned it?"

"I knew better, you officious ass," Laura muttered. "Why give you another reason to try and control me?" Fortunately for her, only Linda and her mother heard, seeing as Ackerson was too busy ranting and raving to really pay attention.

"And what about the Spartans? Why in the hell did they not say anything? They should have known better than to withhold information like this!" \_Oho, so the Spartans \_didn't\_ tell him! I wonder why.\_ In any case, Ackerson was pissed, and it appeared to Laura that if they were going to get anywhere, West would have to intervene. He did.

"What Laura and the other Spartans may or may not have mentioned in their mission reports is irrelevant at this point, Colonel. Right now we may have larger issues to concern ourselves with: namely, how is this circlet affecting her? According to Dr. Gedeon and SPARTAN-058, she was in a trance-like state and speaking a language unknown to us. If this circlet is affecting her mind, what do we do to ensure this doesn't happen again? And more importantly, how do we reverse the process?"

"Why should we reverse it?" Ackerson had finally calmed down, at least he'd calmed down enough to think in a semi-rational state. "If this circlet accesses subconscious memories, we can use those to fight the Covenant."

"No." The word Dr. Gedeon uttered was soft, but the tone of voice was calm and self-assured, and would brook no argument.

"No? Dr. Gedeon, need I remind youâ€¦"

"I know my duty, Colonel, and as a doctor I must point out what you are missing. This kind of sensory overload can cause mental instability in a person, even a Spartan. I'm no psychiatrist, but even I can see the possible ramifications. With all these memories suddenly flooding through her conscious mind, and with no means of control, it's only a matter of time before Laura goes insane."

"Then what do you suppose we do, Doctor?" West's voice was calm, the voice of reason in an otherwise hostile atmosphere.

"I don't know, perhaps if I were allowed to examine the circletâ€|"

"The circlet." Laura's voice echoed through the room, previously silent for the entire debate. "The circlet is the key."

"Explain yourself, Blade," Ackerson snapped; as annoyed as he was with Dr. Gedeon countering him in front of others, he was just as pissed at her daughter for what he saw as withholding information that could turn the tide of the war.

"I was having the dreams before we'd even heard of the circlet, and they only sharpened once I put that thing on. If I put it on again, maybe I can find some means of control, some method to stop the flow."

"Laura Elizabeth Morisson, have you lost your mind?"

"Mom," Laura rolled her eyes, "if we don't do something I'm going to lose my mind anyway. We don't have much of a choice."

Dr. Gedeon, General West, and the Spartans were watching from a nearby observation room. The Master Chief wasn't present, but only West knew why. He also knew exactly why he hadn't contacted the Spartan about this operation. \_If he knew what was going on right now, he'd probably be furious\_, he mused as he watched Laura put on the device.

"I hope Laura knows what she's doing," Fred stated as he glared at the Spartan on the cot. Not that he'd ever let on, but he was worried about Laura's survival during this whole thing.

"Fred, put a cork in it. If she doesn't do this she'll go crazy, and things would only get that much worse," Linda snapped. "Do you feel like trying to take her on if she goes insane, especially knowing what she's capable of?" She too was worried; she'd grown fond of Laura, if only because she reminded Linda of herself.

"Laura knows what she's doing," her mother murmured, trying to reassure herself more than the others. "She'll be fine, she always is."

As they watched, Laura's eyes glazed over, and she went into a dazed state.

Laura felt as if she were running through a holovid stuck in fast-forward. The memories were flashing past her, too fast to describe and yet she knew exactly what she saw. Alaya's life was flashing before her eyes, and she could see everything, feel everything: pain, grief, love, desire, rage, fear, despair, and hope. She saw the people Alaya had loved, the people who had hated her, the people who loved her, the man who chose her as his bride over all the women who had flocked to his side, all because she had stood up to him and won first his respect, then his heart.

Suddenly, the memories stopped, and a blackness fell, like a curtain between the acts of a play. The blackness lifted, and Laura found



herself in a forest clearing, filled with flowers and with a stream running through. Stooping to bathe her face in the water, she realized she was not alone.

"Welcome, child. I've been waiting for you for a while." She stepped out from among the trees, bare feet upon the grass. A flowing green gown fell past her knees, and dark hair fell untied around her waist, gently blowing in a slight breeze. \_She could easily pass for my twin sister!\_

"Who are you?" Laura challenged, crouching in a combat stance. The woman laughed: a clear, low melody much like Laura's own laughter.

"I am Alaya, to an extent. You hold my memories in your subconscious mind, and thus you hold an echo of me. The circlet you wear in the physical world has given you the power to access these memories."

"How? Is this even possible?"

"For your limited technology, no. For us, for our empire, it was not only possible, it was proven. The circlet is the proof. By wearing it you have stimulated a portion of your mind that you humans no longer use, and it is this portion which holds my memories and knowledge. Subconsciously, you know it is there, but you cannot call it as you please. Now that you have put on the circlet, the knowledge is at your beck-and-call."

"No, it isn't. I can't control the memories, they just come. Lately it's been getting harder to keep my memories separate from yours. I'm losing control of my own mind."

The image of Alaya looked troubled. "I do not understand. But since you no longer use that portion of your mind, perhaps you no longer have the knowledge to control the flow of the subconscious into the conscious."

"But you do. Please, tell me how to control them."

Alaya smiled. "You truly are my descendant, genetically at any rate. We laid the seeds of life before we activated the rings, but I never dared hope they would grow. When you wake, you will have the knowledge. Use the knowledge wisely: I sense that power still corrupts as it did when I lived."

Laura sat up and removed the circlet with trembling hands. One slow tear trickled down her cheek, and more threatened to spill over.

"Laurabeth?" her mother's voice came through. "Are you all right?" She turned her face away, trying to hide the tears that she could no longer contain. When she spoke, her voice quivered slightly, just enough for them to hear she was upset.

"I remember, now. I remember."

Hi guys! Now that I've got decent 'net connections I can get back into the action full force! Anyways, this was my attempt at explaining the origins of the Gravemind from Halo2, but it didn't quite turn out well. Halo-1 is actually Delta Halo: I didn't find out it was Halo-05 until after I'd written it. Enjoy! Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

#### 14. Origins of Evil

Alaya powered up her computer terminal in the lab and called up a status report from HALO-1. As standard status reports flooded in, she recalled a cryptic message she'd received from the head scientist the day before. Four words, seemingly innocent, but something about them chilled her to the core:

\_The Gravemind is stirring.\_

Alaya stopped the reports and directed an inquiry into HALO-1's science labs: a request for information on their chief of operations. Her eyes widened as she scanned the reports, and she quickly called up another file, one she'd stumbled across by accident and left alone. There was one word in it that had stuck in her memory: \_gravemind\_. Finding the file, Alaya opened it and began to read its contents. It was a file one of the other scientists had composed on the Flood, including rumors spread among the soldiers.

\_Rumors persist of a creature controlling the Flood forms, a strange worker of death, said to have only thoughts of putting all life into the grave. These rumors have subsequently given this 'creature' a name: the Gravemind. While I have found no evidence of this creature among captured Flood forms, I have noticed that they seem to act as though in response to a much higher intelligence than their own. I have yet to confirm this, however.\_

Alaya closed the file, and gathered her courage. She had to face the High Council; clearly something was amiss, or else why did the chief scientist on HALO-1 send her that message? And why was he now dead?

"Council members, there are things I must know regarding the Flood if I am to continue my research effectively."

"Speak on, Alaya. What would you know?" the Council Master replied.

"During my research on the Flood, I came across a file written some time ago," she began as she displayed the file in question. "It mentions rumors of a creature styled as 'the Gravemind', and points to a possibility of some higher intellect controlling the Flood. This alone is disturbing to consider, but I have more news you must hear." She hesitated, trying to find the right words, then continued.

"The other day, I received a message from HALO-1." She noticed some members of the Council shift uneasily in their seats. "It was only four words, but those words speak clearly to me now." Displaying the message, and noting the looks of fear on their faces, Alaya went on, "The scientist who sent this, the chief of scientific operations on HALO-1, is now reported dead, killed in a laboratory accident, but the circumstances are unusual. Council members, I must know—is there a creature called the Gravemind?"

"Alaya, you need not concern yourself with this," a Prophet on the Council murmured quietly. Alaya was unmoved.

"You have answered my question without saying anything. I have read your looks and heard the fear in your voices. This creature does exist, and you know of it. Why then did you not tell us? If we had known, we could have destroyed it!"

"It is not that simple," a Brute declared. The Brutes, wrongly called so because of their monstrous appearance and ferocity in battle, were known for their ability to balance war with necessity; they were warriors who understood and respected needs other than battle, no matter how much they preferred the battlefield. "The Gravemind is not merely a creature controlling the Flood. It used to be something else." He displayed a file that no one had seen for many, many years, a file that changed everything Alaya knew about the Flood.

\_ 'Project Thanatos status report: Our experiments are growing more successful each day. Test subject Oratus is almost ready for the final stage—the creation of the ultimate weapon. Two minutes remain before the final stage.' The human recording this stopped and looked down into a laboratory, where a once-human figure was strapped to a table. The man's skin was a sickly-mottled combination of green and yellow combined with flesh, his eyes had disappeared, and his limbs were longer than they should be. An Elite warrior platoon stood nearby, along with a pair of Hunters. They watched as another scientist injected the sick man with a viscous substance. The man referred to as Oratus began to twitch uncontrollably, breaking his restraints. All watched in horrified fascination as several tentacles sprouted from his body, which receded into itself until it formed a roughly spherical shape. The end result was a horrible creature, a creature which spoke in a deep voice.\_

\_ 'Oratus now is dead. I have since claimed his head. The Gravemind now I be, now you meet your destiny.' Screams resonated throughout the room as the beast began to destroy all those within it.\_

The Brute closed the file. "A genetic experiment to create warriors capable of surviving any circumstance. Oratus was a soldier incapable of fighting any longer, and had begun to contemplate the grave. The Gravemind was contained within HALO-1 for study, in the hope of reversing the process; failing that, we hoped we could find a way to control it. It was not only deadly, but also intelligent, but we had no idea it could control the Flood."

Alaya shook her head, still unable to comprehend the horror. "If what you have shown me is true, then we were responsible for creating the Flood. It is we who are to blame for our own predicament." She looked up at the Council. "Why was none of this ever told to me before?"

"We did not think it necessary," a Prophet declared. "There was no proof before that the Gravemind was indeed controlling the Flood. Even when we had the proof, we had hoped still to find some way to control it; destroying it was out of the question, since it had been designed to withstand all our weapons."

"Council members, please hear my words. What I have seen is horrible to consider, but the implications are clear. If the Gravemind is

stirring, it must be guiding the Flood. Without a head, any body will die, and the Gravemind is the head for the body of the Flood. It must be destroyed, and with its death the Flood will be easier to defeat." Her hands shook as she tried to regain composure and pleaded with the Council. "This creature has proven that it cannot be controlled, and if my fears are true, it killed the head scientist on HALO-1. We must destroy the Gravemind."

"Your words are wise, Alaya, as is only right," the Council Master declared. "We shall destroy it as soon as may be." Alaya bowed in relief and left. Once she reached her quarters, her self-composure gave way and she sobbed uncontrollably. \_If what I saw is true, as it must be, \_we\_ created the Flood! And if we created them, how do we destroy them?\_ She felt a greater despair than she had ever known before, and feared that they were fighting a war without end.

## 15. Chapter 15: Small Comfort

Hey guys! Thanks to everyone who's read/reviewed (you know who you are :D). Got a new chapter for your enjoyment--a look at what Laura was feeling after the Chief was sent away, and a look at how he was able to get home. Enjoy! Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

### 15. Small Comfort

West studied the report on his desk, frowning. The Spartans had been showing up around Laura more frequently than on previous occasions, with the exception of SPARTAN-117. It almost seemed as if they were following her around, but why? His eyes glanced to a video screen: Laura was finishing a workout. Looking closely at her face, West swore he saw the glimmer of tears in her dark eyes. \_What's got her upset now?\_ The fact that the tears were so apparent was trouble.

Laura stretched her arms over her head, completing the cool-down from her workout. This had once been her favorite part of the day on base, venting her frustrations through grueling exercise, but now it felt more like some kind of monotonous task. \_Why?\_ A pair of dark eyes came into focus, eyes set into a face hardened by battle with an unstoppable enemy: John's face. She shook her head in an attempt to clear the image away. \_I miss him\_, she thought sadly, feeling the tears gathering in her eyes.

"What's wrong, Laura?" West's voice came up behind her.

"Nothing I can't handle, sir," she replied quietly. Turning around and facing him, Laura found she couldn't look him in the eye. "I'll be fine."

"You always were a bad liar, Laura," West said in a low voice. Dropping his voice to almost a whisper, he added, "Worrying about your family again?"

"Nothing's wrong, sir." A subtle shake of her head was all the clue West needed. \_The Master Chief, that's what's on her mind\_. He couldn't say more though, not with half the base in a position to be looking on. All he could do was wait until later, and talk to her in her quarters.

"Hi, Linda." The cheery tone in her voice was false, and even the Spartan could tell. Linda shook her head in what passed for disbelief.

"Still worried? John will come back."

"I don't know, something just isn't sitting right about this whole thing. Ackerson's not going to just let him come back so easily." Laura scowled. "I can't believe he's going after John like this, he's never been that stupid before."

A faint smile crossed Linda's face. "You've turned the tables on him so long that he's getting desperate. What he forgot is that John's very good at what he does."

"Small comfort, that," Laura replied sourly. "John doesn't quite understand what ONI can do, not yet. I've been at odds with them for years, he's listened to them for as long. Can you honestly blame me for worrying?"

Both women sat in silence after that, Laura carving a block of wood into some object or another, Linda simply sitting and watching. Both were surprised when a knock sounded on the door, then Laura's lips curled into a wry smile.

"West, he always knocks the same way. Any bets he wants to know what's wrong with me?"

\_Well, that was an informative visit\_, West mused as he returned to his office. Secure in her bunkhouse, Laura had vented all her worries between two people she could trust (three if you counted Lorienna, who heard everything that went on in that bunk anyway). A lot of things made sense now, including the reason for the Spartans following her around. \_He really does care about her, if he's asked the others to keep an eye on her\_.

West turned his attention once again to his office, and the reports awaiting him. Once he had completed the necessary work, he'd be able to do a few extra things. The fact that Ackerson had seemingly sent the Master Chief on a mission without proper authorization (which was highly likely, given the increasing defenses around Earth) meant there was something he could do. He'd have to start by pulling in a few favors from ONI officials, so Ackerson would come under close scrutiny. The next step would be bringing the Master Chief, and any soldiers with him, back home.

## 16. Chapter 16: Stowaway

Hello again! This chapter's a little bit different--it takes place during Halo 2, right before the Brutes try to fire the ring. I knew there was no possible way to fit it in the regular story, but it was just too good to pass up. Again, HALO-01 is Delta Halo, but I'm just too lazy to go back and fix it. Enjoy! Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

### 16. Stowaway

"343 Guilty Spark!"

The little construct, clutched in the arm of the Brute Tartarus, clucked in surprise at the sharp tone, and clucked even more at the voice's next words.

"Deactivate ring firing sequence, authorization code 50492624." The nullification code had been requested by the High Council in case they needed to deactivate the ring in a hurry, and Spark was obligated to comply, if the proper codes were given. The authorization code was familiar, as was the voice that had given it, but after 101,217 years he had forgotten whose it was. The ring nullification codes were fresh, if only because he'd never understood their meaning and had pondered it for millennia.

"Does a tear make a sound when it falls?" Spark asked, awaiting the countersign.

It came surprisingly quickly. "Hope springs eternal."

"Only the High Council knows those codes," Spark mused as he sent out a handshake signal, interfaced with the ring's systems and began to disarm the ring.

"Incorrect. One other person knew those codes. I'm disappointed, Spark. Not only have you forgotten your data, you have also abandoned your post. I confess I am quite disappointed; I thought you were programmed better than that." Then Spark remembered whose code that had been, and whose voice that was.

"The Creator! Alaya!"

"Not exactly, Spark," the voice replied as a slender human figure dropped down from the shadows into the shadows. She took in the situation at a glance: Sergeant Johnson and an Elite facing off against several Brutes, one of which held the construct under one arm and held Commander Miranda Keyes in the other. Keyes held an unusual device, which she recognized as the Index, the activation key for the ring's primary weapon. From the looks of things, the Brute was trying to force Keyes to insert the Index into the control panels.

"Use you logic, if there's any left after all this time. Assuming that Alaya and the others managed to escape the rings and the Flood, do you really think it possible for any one of them to survive for all that time? Even technology must give way to nature in the end. Alaya is dead, one way or the other. I have her form, and some of her memories, but I am not her. Alaya was a scientist, I am a soldier; she was a creator, I am a destroyer; she was beloved, I am reviled. She was Alaya, I am Laura." With that, Laura moved out of the shadows so the group could see her. The Brutes growled menacingly, until she pointed a pistol directly at the Index.

"I wouldn't, if I were you. Do you really think I'd miss? Would you be willing to take that chance, and risk the destruction of the Index?" They stopped raising their weapons. "I didn't think so. Now, move away from the control panel."

"What the hell is goin' on?" Johnson asked.

"Look who's talking, Johnson," she replied, keeping her pistol fixed on the Index, noting through narrowed eyes that none of the Brute

were moving. "I got bored so I hitched a ride on \_In Amber Clad\_, wound up here, and have been tracking you ever since. Fortunately I had a bit of an advantage, but on to more urgent business. What are you doing here?"

"Those Covie bastards came after Earth, and tried to jump away. Commander Keyes followed 'em, and now they're tryin' to kill us all."

"Figures. But how in hell do those monkey men," she gestured to the Brutes, who snarled but did nothing, "know about the Index, or how to arm the ring?" She glared at the little construct clutched under the lead Brute's arm. "Did you tell them, Spark?"

"Of course," the little AI replied, then added almost contritely, "I had little choice."

Laura fixed her dark eyes on Spark. "343 Guilty Spark, I demand honest and complete answers to my questions. First off, which installation is this—"what is its designation?"

"If you have the Creator's memories, then you should know. However, this is installation 01, the primary of the ringworlds. This installation—" "

"HALO-1?! You are certain of this?" Laura's eyes went wide with fear. "The Gravemind!" Memories flooded through her, memories of a genetics experiment gone horribly wrong, memories of how Alaya had discovered the true origins of the Flood, origins the Council had tried hard to forget. She shook her head to clear the memories away for later. "Spark, where is the Monitor of this installation?"

"Unknown. No doubt he has gone to find a Reclaimer such as this one," Spark chirped.

"A futile search, Spark. There are no Reclaimers to be found. We have forgotten all that we once were, and we don't know our true history. The Council is lost, the races are divided, and knowledge has been twisted to serve power. Look how far we've fallen."

"Blasphemy!" the large Brute growled.

"Really? Is it truly blasphemy, or a truth you find inconvenient? If it is blasphemy, how is it that I am mistaken for a Forerunner, a Forerunner who created 343 Guilty Spark of all things?" She shifted position and moved towards the control panels, keeping her weapon fixed on the Index. \_As long as I keep the Index in danger, they won't do anything. They won't try to fire the ring and risk damaging the Index.\_ She held the pistol in one hand and with her other hand began tapping controls, knowing exactly which ones to touch without even looking. The records of the HALO stations were accessible from any control center, and she accessed one from what once had been HALO-4.

\_Alaya was hurriedly typing commands into the main control center. She was one of the only ones capable of activating the last resort weapon she had designed; all the others were rushing to the shield worlds to escape the blast. There wasn't much time left before the Flood consumed all remaining life in this galaxy. She heard Corin behind her, running across the slender bridge, but she dared not

stop.\_

\_"Alaya, we must go now!"\_

\_"Corin, you go, I'll catch up. I must activate the ring, I'm the only one who can."\_

\_"Stop being noble. You'd never make it to the ship in time."\_

\_"Then you go. You have to survive, I'm not that valuable. If only one of us can survive, you're it. Corin, just go!" She practically shouted that last one at him, wishing he'd listen to her and go.\_

\_"Alaya, I won't leave without you."\_

\_Alaya continued to enter commands, hoping Corin would leave her there. She never noticed Thaddeus enter, never saw the look that passed between them. All she knew was that Corin suddenly grabbed her and pulled her toward the door as the old Prophet took over the controls.\_

\_"Corin, get her to safety. The two of you are the best hope for the future. Head for the shield worlds, and remember this." Thaddeus finished entering the commands and remained before the controls, hearing Alaya screaming as Corin pulled her away.\_

\_"Thaddeus, no! NO!"\_

Laura felt a single tear run down her face. "So, that's how it ended. I wonder if they ever made it to safety. I hope they did." She noticed the Brutes tensing and tightened her grip on her gun. "You still believe the lie? Having seen the records for yourself, you still believe the twisted half-truths the Prophets fed you? This is not what the ancient ones intended for us: we were to be united, not divided. The Council was composed of all the races, two members of each race: Grunts, Jackals, Elites, Engineers, Brutes, Hunters, Prophets, and Humans. Each race had its own skills, and each was respected for what it had to offer. Don't believe me? Ask him!" She indicated Spark with her free hand.

"Oracle, is this true?" Tartarus growled. Laura smirked a little at the Brute's disbelieving growl.

"Of course," Spark said, his one blue eye seeming to glow brighter. "How could you not know?"

"Never mind about that, Spark," Laura shouted, her smile vanishing as she realized something terrible, something she should have realized at once. "Answer me truly: why wasn't the Gravemind destroyed? Why did the Council let it live?"

"It was hoped that they would learn to control it, and use it to fight the Flood," Spark responded, his tone seemingly innocent of any wrongdoing.

"The fools! They tried to control it once before, and failed! They told her they'd had the Gravemind destroyed! And now, now that we've come here—where is it now? \_Where is the Gravemind now?\_" Her voice



was growing frantic as she realized the consequences. \_If that thing escapes, we're doomed.\_

"According to data sensors, the creature you refer to as the 'Gravemind' is no longer on station. Activation of the ring is the only alternative to total Flood infestation."

"There's got to be another way. There's always another way. Remember, Spark? Hope springs eternal." Laura slipped away into the shadows, determined to get to Earth and warn them of the new threat. She had no idea that behind her, the Brutes were about to force the activation of the ring, no idea that the Great Prophet of Truth was hurtling towards Earth with the man she loved on his trail. All she knew was her duty; she had to return to Earth, no matter what. She had to warn them of the Gravemind.

## 17. Chapter 17: Spartan Tears

Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

### Spartan Tears

\_Just another day at the ranch\_, Laura mused as she headed back to her bunk after her workout. For once it had been a refreshingly grueling session, and she was looking forward to a long rest, possibly finishing that carving of a soaring eagle. \_Maybe if I'm lucky, I'll be able to finish it and paint it. Ok, maybe not paint it, but maybe it'll look lifelike.\_ Humming Pat Benatar's \_Hit Me With Your Best Shot\_ under her breath, Laura unlocked her door and stepped inside.

"Oly Oly En Free," she called lightly once the door was closed.

"Hi, Laura," the disembodied echo replied, followed by a figure in blue and silver. The look on Lorient's face took her aback: she seemed uneasy, which rarely happened nowadays.

"What is it?" When no answer was forthcoming, Laura moved to a computer terminal. "Lorient, tell me or I will find out myself."

"Laura, you're not going to like thisâ€¦"

"You're sure? You found his body?"

"General West, there wasn't much left. The \_Orion\_ was pretty much ashes and scrap metal by the time we got there." The younger man on the screen lowered his gaze. "It's safe to assume Colonel Morisson was KIA, along with his crew."

"I understand," West responded after a moment. His voice was heavy with grief; Pete Morisson had been a good friend of his for a long time. "I'll extend your sympathies to his family. West out."

As he disconnected the communication, a glance at a different terminal brought him upright with a cold chill. \_This is not good\_, he thought. \_In this state there could be trouble, especially if she's upset for the reason I think she is.\_ Leaving his office, West

hoped he was wrong.

He was just nearing a window overlooking the gym when he overheard a snippet of conversation between a group of Marines.

"She's an unfeeling, cold-hearted bitch, that Blade. I don't know what she's thinking."

"Excuse me?" West interrupted coldly; the Marines jumped about thirty feet straight up.

"Sir!" Each Marine snapped off a salute, but West didn't return it. He was scowling fiercely, and it didn't take a genius to figure out he was pissed.

"I want you men to take a look at something." He led them to the window. Looking down, they saw Laura in true form, kicking and punching an exercise bag. Something was different, though: a closer look revealed a few shiny trails on her otherwise furious mask.

"She just found out her father was killed," West spoke from behind the group. "No one was going to tell her, so she had to find out the hard way. Colonel Morisson was one of the few people who believed in her, and who actually gave a damn about how she felt.

"Look at her closely, kids. See the tears on her face? See how she's fighting to keep control?" His next words surprised the Marines.

"Next time you try to say she's an unfeeling, cold-hearted bitch, remember this."

Laura attacked the punching bag with all her strength, channeling all her grief and rage into the blows. Each hit sent numbing waves down her arm and pain down her thigh, but she couldn't stop.

An off-balanced roundhouse kick sent her tumbling into the exercise bag, and she made no move to get up. She just lay there, leaning limply against the bag, sobbing into the rough burlap material. "It's my fault, it's all my fault." She didn't even hear the footsteps behind her, and didn't register at first whose slim hand rested on her shoulder.

"Laura," Nicole's soft voice broke through the haze, bringing the tears even harder. She just sat there and cried, while her best friend held her and tried to comfort her.

"I could've saved him, Nick," she sobbed. "I let him die, it's all my fault."

"You can't do everything, Laura. Even you can't save the entire human race on your own. It wasn't your fault, it never was."

The two women stayed that way for some time: Laura crying in grief and pain, Nicole trying her best to comfort her friend.

She stood there, silent in the shadows, long after the others had gone. Even after all this time, most military personnel wanted nothing to do with her, couldn't stand the sight of her. It wasn't fair for her to not stand at her father's memorial, to not be by her

family, but they wouldn't have it any other way.

There was no one else around, finally. She moved forward, long hair tightly braided, and stood before the monument. Kneeling in front of the marble, she pulled her father's gift from her belt, watching as the gemstones in the hilts glistened in the fading light. \_I'm sorry, Daddy, I'm so sorry.\_ She raised the \_sais\_ above her head and plunged them diagonally into the ground, blades crossing as they sank into the earth. Pulling a knife from her boot, she cut off her braid and wound it around the twin blades in the earth.

"I failed you, Dad. I let you die, when I could've saved you." The tears began coursing slowly down her cheeks, and she let them fall.

## 18. Chapter 18: Nightmares and Moonlight

Hi guys! Another deleted scene up for your enjoyment. Alas, there's only a couple left (please don't kill me!). Anyways, I was kinda playing around with this one in a couple ways: how did Laura's capture really affect her, and how would someone help her out? Enjoy! Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

**\*\*WARNING--MATURE CONTENT IN THIS CHAPTER!!!!\*\***

### 18. Nightmares and Moonlight

\_The Prophet questioned her for hours about Earth's defenses, but she gave no answer. Each refusal to speak was rewarded with a stab from the spearsâ€¦The Brutes and the Prophet were clearly losing patience; the 'holy one' ordered the maximum amount of pain. Laura lost her control only then; she broke, but it wasn't anywhere near what the Prophet was hoping for. She screamed in pain, a loud, echoing soundâ€¦\_

"Huh!" Laura pushed herself upright, waking herself from the nightmare. She was shaking, and a cold sweat drenched her forehead. The nightmare she'd just had was a familiar one, but it was still disturbing. \_Oh hell, am I going to be stuck with this for the rest of my life?\_ She leaned back on her palms, the mattress giving under her hands as she tried to clear her head. A stirring to her left brought her attention to the man beside her; John shifted in his sleep, bringing a smile to her lips. \_Damn the man, he can sleep through anything\_, she thought fondly. Slipping out of the bed, Laura moved to the window and looked out: the moon was full and lit up the grass. Casting another fond look at the sleeping body in bed, she left the room.

The grass was cool and damp beneath her bare feet, a soft breeze rustled her pale pink nightgown around her body. \_I'm going to miss this while I'm away.\_ She'd been temporarily assigned to serve on Cairo Station as a liaison between the Covenant and the UNSC, and in a few days she'd be leaving. \_Hopefully it won't be for too long\_, she hoped as the grass tickled her ankles. She felt the breeze again, and a laugh escaped her throat: the night was young, she was alive, why should she be worried? She ran lightly along the ground, long legs capering gracefully as she danced with the breeze, trying to forget her fears for a little while. So absorbed in her movements and

wrapped in the magic of the night, Laura didn't even notice she'd been followed until strong arms caught her around the waist.

"Whatâ€|?" She struggled for a moment, then stilled when she realized who it could only be.

"\_Alaya\_," a rough voice whispered in her ear as John's arms tightened around her. Laura closed her eyes and leaned her head back against him, shivering when he pressed a kiss to her throat. Part of her registered his bare torso, right before she felt his arousal against her thigh. \_Must be the moonlight\_, she thought as she remembered a similar night some time ago.

"Did I wake you?" she whispered.

"I was awake when you woke up." He turned her around and looked at her, his eyes holding a worried look. "What happened?"

"It's nothing, John. Just a nightmare." She didn't want to tell him, but knew better than to not; one way or another he'd find out. "I was dreaming about my capture again."

"Again?" His eyes narrowed, and his grip on her arms tightened a bit. "You've had these before?"

"It's perfectly normal, some people can have nightmares for years after a traumatic situation." She sighed. "I don't like it, but there's not a whole lot I can do about it."

"You can forget," John murmured in her ear, pulling her against him. She looked so beautiful, so tempting standing in the moonlight, with the breeze playing with her hair and fluttering her nightgown around her body.

"And just how am I supposed to forget?" she smiled, a hint of a challenge in her eyes. She knew he could never turn down a dare or a challenge, and as expected he didn't now.

"By thinking of something more pleasant. Something like Silver Pond." One hand slid down her back, cupping her butt and making her shudder. "Remember that night?"

"Do you honestly think I could forget?" she asked, her voice breathless. \_Does he even know how he affects me when he does that?\_ She pressed closer to him as his other hand tangled in her dark hair. "That was practically the best night of my life!" Her breathing quickened as she saw his face; she knew \_that\_ look all too well.

"It's been too long," John whispered in her ear as he pulled her tighter against him; he'd learned quickly how that drove her crazy. "Too long since it was just us, alone."

\_That much is true enough\_, Laura thought wryly, shivering again when John kissed her neck. They'd both had their assignments, and had only caught up with each other that evening. Even as she reflected on how happy they'd been to see each other, her thoughts went haywire when John caught her face and kissed her fully, the touch of his lips on hers shutting down all conscious thought.

"John!" she gasped when they finally broke away. He cupped her head, his hands framing her face.

"I can't wait anymore, \_alaya\_," he whispered. Pulling her against him, he kissed her again, hands caressing her body through the thin material of her nightgown. She whimpered a little at his touch, but soon got even with him as she ran one hand along his chest. As her fingers brushed places she knew drove him wild, he caught her hands and held them to her sides.

"Do you know what you do to me, Laura?" he whispered hoarsely, fighting the urge to throw her to the ground and claim her.

"I could ask you the same question," she moaned, writhing in his grasp.

Neither one managed to speak another word. Neither one knew who made the first move, but in a matter of minutes both were laying in the grass, the dewy ground doing nothing to cool their passion. Laura felt John reaching for the hem of her nightgown, struggling to pull it over her head; she giggled a little and pulled his face closer.

"It's only cloth, how bad can it be?" Her teasing words had the effect she wanted: John gripped the nightgown and tore the thin fabric completely off her body, tossing it aside like an empty weapon. She looked beautiful as she lay there in the grass, moonlight glowing on her skin, dark hair in wild disarray. He kissed her again, hands roving along her body; he knew exactly how to touch her, how to drive her crazy in the best possible way. A shudder rippled through him as Laura's hand "accidentally" brushed him.

"Oops," she murmured, her voice low and melodious. Sliding her hands around his waist, she touched him again as she slid his pants down.

"If you do that again!" John warned in a threatening tone, then hissed as she did exactly that.

He couldn't take anymore: pressing her into the ground, he entered her in one thrust. She gasped as she felt him sliding in and out of her, moving in a rhythm both of them knew well. Their kisses intensified as the end approached.

"John!" She cried out his name, her climax rippling through her body. A moment later she heard him cry out his own release. He collapsed on top of her, too shaken to move.

"It's definitely been too long," he finally whispered, rolling off her and to the side.

"Agreed." Laura brushed one finger along his jawline, admiring his face in the moonlight. "I missed you."

"That much I caught on to," he smiled; she was one of the few people who could get him to smile, or to express any other emotion, for that matter. Finally looking around, John got to his feet and pulled her up. "We should probably go back inside."

"Get some rest, you mean?" Laura smirked as she picked up the remains of her nightgown.

"Among other things." With another of his rare smiles, John followed her into the house. "At least you won't have to worry about nightmares anymore."

"No, I'll be too tired to dream, I bet," she replied, her smile matching his own.

## 19. Chapter 19: Alternate Ending

Hey all! Glad to see so many people have been enjoying the 'deleted scenes', and I'm sorry to say they're almost done. Oh well, all things must end I suppose. Anyway, this one's kind of an alternate ending I came up with for Secret Spartan, and wound up not using for obvious reasons (please don't kill me!). Enjoy! Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

### 19. Bittersweet Freedom

The war was practically over: the Covenant leadership was torn apart, and the ensuing civil war had brought about an unlikely alliance. The Elites, Grunts, and Hunters were now their allies, and surprisingly enough, Laura took it fairly well. Plenty of people thought that odd, but the ones who knew her well understood. \_Ah, well, let them think what they like\_, she thought as she finished her workout. For the past few weeks she'd been stationed on the \_Cairo\_, for whatever reason, and the gym wasn't up to her usual tastes. She made the best of it, though, and pushed herself harder with what she \_could\_ do. No music for her workouts here, but it didn't matter. She practiced with the music in order to get its rhythm, the feel of it actually \_inside\_ her body, so to speak; once she could actually \_feel\_ the music, it was there at her beck-and-call and she no longer needed to hear it. She'd tried explaining it before to General West, but he didn't quite grasp the concept. \_Hey, if it works\_, she thought to herself before slipping into 'battle-mode'. \_Front Line\_ came through clearly in her mind, and for a while she forgot about everything but the workout, motions coming in time with a rhythm only she could hear and feel.

When she came out of her trance-like state, the first thing she registered was the sound of applause, the second thing the sight of a man she'd hoped never to see again.

"Well done, Blade. I was afraid you'd lost your edge," Ackerson called.

"Piss off, you sadistic shit." She began packing up her gear and was about to exit when Ackerson called.

"I have a new mission for you."

"So what? I'm not on your staff anymore; Admiral Hood saw to that. I go by UNSC orders now. Besides, you have no more leverage over me." Laura knew for a fact that if he threatened Dr. Gedeon, the Master Chief, or any of her friends, the UNSC would come down on him faster than he could guess.

"Oh no? Then tell me something, Blade: who are Sam and Kelly?" Laura froze.

"I'm sure I don't know who you mean."

"You always were a bad liar. ONI intercepted a communiqué the other evening, something about two twins suffering from abnormal growth?" He smirked. "Now, normally we wouldn't take an interest in the matter, but it would appear that these circumstances are caused byâ€¦"

"Shut up!" She lunged and pinned him to the wall, a risky move considering all the cameras but she couldn't allow him to say more. "If you even think about threatening them, I will kill you myself," she whispered through clenched teeth.

"Oh on the contrary, I'm offering to help them," the bastard replied, his voice smooth as silk. "If you take care of this mission, I swear I'll see to their medical needs. If not, then you'll only have yourself to blame."

Laura let him go. "Fine, but no tricks this time, Ackerson. If I find out you've lied to me, I promise you I will hunt you down, and you will pay for it." She picked him up and tossed him out of the room.

"Sir, I've detected an anomalous communications feed from inside the station," Cortana reported.

"Show me." Admiral Hood scanned the screen, but all he could see was an unusual assortment of characters: not Covenant calligraphy, and certainly not the Forerunner glyphs he'd seen in the Chief's reports. "Any idea what these are?"

"Working. It appears to be a form of one of the Earth languages, Celtic to be exact. Translating now." The jumble of runes shifted to recognizable text, and from the format it appeared to be a conversation between two unknown parties.

\_I am the eagle, the wolf, the mare. Define me then if you so dare.\_

\_I am the eagle, the wolf, the mare. Should you cross my path, beware.\_

\_Glad to see you're still around, kid. We've got trouble.\_

\_Obviously, if we're even having this conversation. What is it?\_

\_I'm being sent on another suicide mission, a black-op. HE's back.\_

\_And he's sending you? What's his angle this time? What's the job?\_

\_Take out a Covie munitions depot/factory. I go in and blow the place, the cavalry mops up the stragglers right after. About 600,000 Covie troops in all, mostly Brutes and Jackals.\_

\_ [And you accepted this op? Why in hell would you wait what's the threat this time?\_

\_ Sam and Kelly. He claims ONI can treat their condition.\_

\_ [WHAT?!?! That sadistic shit! I've hacked their records already and they have no useful data about that! That bastard!\_

\_ I agree, but now's not the time. I leave in a week to set this show going.\_

\_ [What do you need from me?\_

\_ No hacking for once they gave me all the info. Unfortunately, I can't tell anyone what's going on.\_

\_ [You told me.\_

\_ I need you. I can't contact anyone, not directly anyway.\_

\_ [So you need me to pass on a message. Who to?\_

\_ Mom, West, Nick and Nathe. Tell them to keep their eyes open. Tell Mom to get the twins out of there, get them to the  
\_ Hopeful.

\_ [Jeromi.\_

\_ Mom has the clout to get them there, and to get Jeromi to help them if he can. They'll be safer there if HE decides to go back on his word.\_

\_ [Are you going to tell John?\_

\_ No. Better he doesn't know. He'll be safer that way. I better go, before they catch on. Take care, old friend.\_

\_ [Good luck.\_

The entire conversation had taken place a little over an hour ago. Hood shook his head and muttered, "What the hell's going on?"

Laura switched off the com relay and packed it up just as a knock sounded on her door. Checking to make sure her knives were concealed in her robe, she called, "It's open." Heavy footsteps moved almost silently along the floor; she knew that tread and didn't protest when she felt a pair of warm arms wrap around her waist, pulling her against a solid form.

"I figured you'd still be up, \_alaya\_, " he whispered along her neck, stopping when he encountered the silver chain. John turned her around and examined the little silver snowflake at her throat: where the center spot had been plain was now engraved the name \_John\_.

"Not exactly a wedding band, but it was the best I could do," Laura smiled sadly; she wished she could be his wife, leave the military for good, and raise their children properly.

"I love it, because I love you," he whispered as he captured her lips



with his own. Moving his hands down her body, he stopped suddenly. One eyebrow shot up as he felt the twin knives at her hips, and he looked at her curiously.

"I ran into a little trouble earlier." Moving closer, she whispered, "He's back."

John tensed, knowing exactly who his lover was referring to. "Did he threaten you?"

"Not exactly. He's sending me on a mission, and for once I'm getting all the info I need." A brief scowl marred her features, a look that meant trouble for anything or anyone who crossed her path. "He's up to something, but so am I."

John snickered, something he rarely did. "Then he's in trouble. When my \_alaya\_ gets devious, there's nothing that can stop her." He pulled her closer, and opened her robe, hands caressing her curved figure even as he unbuckled the belt around her waist. Laura wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him passionately as they fell backwards onto her bed.

For the rest of the night they forgot about what was coming.

----

Two weeks after she'd been sent out on her mission, the Master Chief found himself wandering a barren planet that had once been a munitions factory. Nearby, he overheard a technician talking to Hood and Ackerson, who had personally come to see what Blade had accomplished.

"Well sir, based on the amount of debris, what's left of it anyway, the plant was smaller than the initial estimates."

"Then why in hell were we told otherwise?" Hood growled.

"Sir, I couldn't say for certain without talking to the operative in question, but the radiation counts and blast damage suggests a previous disaster. It almost seems as if someone destroyed a much-larger structure that had previously sat in this location, and the Covenant decided to rebuild."

The Chief had heard enough, now he focused on the real reason for his being on the planet. "BLADE, do you read? SPARTAN-000, do you read?"

"Hey, Chief, look at this!" Johnson was standing by a ruined pillar, unwinding something from around its circumference. He held up a slender, braided rope that was about as long as his forearm, a rope that glistened like copper in the sun. The Master Chief moved forward and took the braid from Johnson's grasp.

"Blade's been here," he told the black man, then looked at the pillar where the hair had been caught. Roughly carved into the alien metal was an image of an eagle's talon, rotated so that the claws pointed 'east'. A chant he'd often heard Laura whisper when she was pissed floated to the top of his memory:

\_"I am the eagle, the wolf, the mare. Define me then, if you so dare."

I am the eagle, the wolf, the mare. Should you cross my path, beware." \_

"She's left us a trail," he muttered as he turned 'east' and moved off.

"A trail, Chief?" Johnson asked, seeing nothing that looked remotely like any trail he'd ever seen.

"The picture she left, the talons on it pointed a direction." John scanned the ground in front of him, looking for the next sign.

"Great, so she left clues. Unfortunately we have no idea what the next one'll be."

"A paw print, or something that looks like it." \_I am the eagle, the wolf, the mareâ€|\_

A few moments later, Johnson stopped.

"Hey Chief! Look at this!" Carved into the rock in front of him was a rough outline of a paw print, toes pointing 'north'. The image was marred, however, by a series of claw-marks across the rock. Johnson indicated the marks.

"Looks like Blade ran into some trouble, unless these came after she left it."

"We won't know until we find her." John scanned the direction the print indicated. "There's mountains in that direction. She'll probably be there."

"Maybe we should call in for back-up, Chief?"

"Not yet, Sergeant." \_Not until I know she's safe.\_ "We haven't found her yet, but I doubt she'd leave any pursuit intact."

"Heh, got that right. So what's the next clue?"

"A horse-shoe, probably."

They'd finally followed the last two clues to a small ravine with a bunch of shallow caves. John had been the one to find the last mark: an L-rune that Laura used as her own 'signature', so to speak. It had pointed them to the ravine they stood in now. Noise behind them alerted the Master Chief to the arrival of Admiral Hood, Colonel Ackerson, and several of their Elite allies.

"Chief, what are you doing here?"

"Blade left a trail leading to this location, sirs," John replied, snapping off a salute. Hood nodded.

"Find anything?"

"No sir, not yet."

Without warning, a sharp crack split the air: the report of an S2 sniper rifle. Turning around, the Chief saw Ackerson bleeding from a

shoulder wound. Then a sharp voice echoed through the canyon, containing more expletives than its owner usually used at any one time.

"About fucking time you people showed up! What the hell took you so damn long?" In spite of the sharp tone, Laura sounded like she was in a lot of pain.

"Blade, what are you doing up there?" Hood asked, completely ignoring Ackerson's bleeding shoulder.

"Keeping away from any Covie survivors, and I'm on guard duty. Been here for two weeksâ€" A loud roar resounded, followed by some additional curses and a few rounds of gunfire. "Sit down, Gomer," Laura's voice echoed, sounding tired.

The Chief started forward, followed by several Elites, Marines, and the two officers. Inside the cave they found Laura, sniper rifle in hand, and a wounded Brute in one corner. Laura herself looked in decent condition, but her biomonitors showed a different story: she was dehydrated, malnourished, and had some internal injuries. The first thing the Master Chief did when he entered the cave and saw her biomonitors was to get a first-aid kit and start tending her wounds; Laura shot him a glare that scared most of the Marines. When Hood got up there, the Chief had to force himself to maintain discipline. Halting his examination of Laura's wounds, he stood and snapped off a salute.

"Sir!"

"At ease, son. Blade, you said you were here for two weeks?"

"Yes sir." Blade managed a shaky salute. "ONI sent me here to blow the place two weeks ago. I was told you'd be right behind me. Two days ago I ran out of supplies, and the Covies had almost rebuilt the depot. I had to improvise." She smirked. "Plasma grenades and C4 mix really well, did you know that?" Turning to the side, she began coughing violently, spitting out a mouthful of blood. \_She's hurt, probably badly\_, Hood finally realized.

"Master Chief, get Blade out of here. Get her to one of the Pelicans and back to one of the ships. She needs medical attention."

"Sir!" The Chief saluted, scooped Laura up off the floor of the cave, and draped her over one shoulder. She tried to punch him in the head, but there was no strength in the blow.

"I am not crippled, Master Chief. I can still walk on my own." Shortly after she said this, she passed out. John carried her outside, followed by one of the Elites.

"She is your mate?" John turned and looked at the alien. \_Is it that obvious?\_ Much to the surprise of the alien, the Chief looked uncomfortable for some reason.

"If it were possible, she would be." He loaded the unconscious Spartan into the Pelican and felt the ship taking off. Looking down at his lover, he marveled that even wounded the way she was, she still looked so peaceful when she was asleep. A gentle acceleration heralded their departure from the planet, and brought Laura back to

consciousness.

"Where we headed, Chief?" she asked wearily, careful to maintain the fiction of Spartan and SpecOps.

"Back to the \_Gettysburg\_ to get you fixed up." He stopped and looked at her, face unreadable through his faceplate, but Laura noticed he was tensed. "How long were you out of supplies?"

"I ran out two days ago, like I said," she said, but even to her own ears the lie sounded weak.

"You should know better than to lie to me, Blade." Laura winced, realizing she was trapped. She sighed heavily.

"Six days ago I ran out of rations. I forced myself to skimp on the water, so that lasted until 2 days ago. My med supplies ran out about the same time. All I had left when you showed up was weaponry and a bit of C4." She didn't need to see his face to know he was pissed.

"I swear I will personallyâ€"

"Do what?" she challenged. "I had my orders, and I followed them. And since we're technically not in the same chain of command, I don't see how it concerns you." She shot him a meaningful look, and John forced himself to calm down. Their relationship was something that it wouldn't do to broadcast. Even so, it was hard sometimes to keep from pulling her into his arms, especially now when she was hurt.

Still, he did the one thing he \_could\_ do, since there was no one else in the rear of the Pelican: raising his faceplate, he looked at the wounded Spartan on the deck, his eyes boring into hers. \_I love you\_, the silent message read. Laura's dark eyes reflected the message back to him, before their sharp gaze was blurred by pain.

"Hang in there, Spartan," he muttered. "That's an order."

"You can't order me around, Chief, because I'm not in your chain of command." The smartass quip sounded like the soldier he knew her to be: stubborn, antagonistic, and bitter. It was the same soldier he'd met at first, but now he knew the mask for what it was, and he loved her even more for what she kept hidden.

"I may not be in the same chain of command, but I still outrank you," he said, trying hard to sound annoyed.

"We'll see about that once I get fixed up and I kick your ass," she murmured as she fell asleep again.

----

She stared at the knife in her hands, dark eyes boring into the darkened titanium blade. He'd lied to her, just as all the others had lied to her all her life. Only a few people had been honest with her, but in the end it was this that had been truest of all. This steely blade had never betrayed her, had stayed by her side through countless obstacles. It had never lied, never attacked her, never told her she was worthless. In the end, it seemed to be the only

thing she could rely on no matter what.

Their faces stared at her, pleading for justice. She caressed the still-photograph with one slender finger. \_I failed you, when you needed me most I let you die.\_ Their eyes, smiling when the still-shot was taken, now cried out to her for help. \_Justice will be meted out, I promise you\_. Slipping another knife into a hidden sheath in her boot, she tightened her grip on the blade in her hand. The blades would never betray her, would never lie to her; in the end, they were her only real ally. \_No, not entirely, but I can't go to him, not now, not anymore. I won't tell him; in the end he'll be better off.\_ As the dark cloud of bleak despair settled over her, she slipped her knife into her sleeve and left the room. Justice was about to be served.

The woman sat on the floor of her prison cell, her once-sparkling dark eyes now dulled with grief and fatigue. No one would visit her anymore, no one had any real reason to. They thought her insane, or so she gathered from the whispers of her guards. It would have been so easy for her to escape, she was a SpecOps soldier after all, but where would she go? She had no one to defend her, no one to say she had done the right thing, and no reason to continue. \_Why did he have to do this? Why did he take you away?\_ She felt the blade in her boot once again, the one weapon they'd missed in their search, and knew what she had to do.\_ Death with honor is better than life with dishonor\_.

"Sir?" She called to one of her guards.

"What do you want, Blade?" The hate was unmistakable, but she bore it as she had for many years.

"Could you bring me paper and a pen? Please?"

"Going to write your confession, eh? It'll do you no goodâ€"everyone saw you murder the Colonel." His words were cruel, but he gave her what she asked for. Sitting cross-legged on the floor of her cell, she began to write.

John watched as the UNSC Security Council debated his lover's fate. He still didn't understand what had driven her to this madness. Even when he'd gone to her, she'd kept silent.

\_"Why, \_alaya\_, why did you do it?" She refused to meet his gaze, silent as a stone.\_

He brought himself back just as a surveillance camera was brought online, showing her in her prison cell. She was writing on a pad of paper, her writing flowing across the page in bold strokes. Near the bottom of the page, she signed it with her own 'signature': an L-rune. Dark eyes, hollow and bleak, stared at the camera. She set the pad down on her cot and reached for something in her boot.

"Death with honor is better than life with dishonor." The guards in her cell saw the combat knife, but were too late to stop her from plunging it into her own heart.

"Medic!" one of them shouted, but the woman kicked out at him, trying to silence him. It did her no good, and she was rushed into the

medical wing, still fighting their attempts to save her. A few moments later, one of her guards brought the pad to the Security Council. The bold writing spoke of a mind in turmoil, but the words were most definitely hers, though slightly disjointed by grief:

\_"I write this, a condemned prisoner, knowing you may not believe my words. I would sooner die by my own hand rather than by another's, but I will not leave my truth unspoken. You thought me mad, and in a sense you were right. I suppose grief and betrayal are considered madness in their own right."\_

\_"When Colonel Ackerson sent me on my last mission, he swore he would leave the ones I cared about in peace and unharmed; it was for that reason that I did as he asked. I didn't trust him fully, and warned them to get to safety, but in the end there is nowhere safe enough to run from ONI, especially when one of their own is spurring them on. Ackerson got what he wanted, and then went back on his word. I should have anticipated that, but I never thought he'd go so far as to defy warnings from the UNSC itself. It may look like an accident, but he arranged it that wayâ€"I have seen the proof with my own eyes, and I knew no one else would; I knew you would refuse to see it, you always do. My mother, my children, all dead, all betrayed."\_

\_"You say I have gone mad, you say I murdered him in cold blood, yet who will speak for Ackerson's victims? Who will provide justice for all those he has harmed and killed unjustly? So here I stand, alone, forsaken and doubly betrayed. I would have told you if I knew you would have listened, but you have set your hearts in stone, deciding my fate before even looking at the whole truth. But I have decided, I will not die by your hands. You will not decide my fate. I may be condemned to hell, but at least I go there knowing what I did was right."\_

At the bottom of the pad, right above her 'signature' were three names:

\_Frances Anne Gedeon Morisson\_

\_Samuel Frederic Spartan\_

\_Kelly Linda Spartan\_

John rushed out of the room and to the medical wing, hoping the doctors had gotten to her in time. He arrived and saw her, strapped down and heavily sedated, but still alive. \_Why didn't you tell me?\_ he thought in anguish as he looked at her sleeping form. \_Why did you let me think you were a murderer? Why?\_ Near-silent steps alerted him to someone else's presence.

"Chief, the Council was just contacted by that Lorienna AI," Johnson muttered quietly, not wanting to wake the Spartan in the bed. "They're having a real long chat, but it looks like she'll get off."

"She never told me, not once," John whispered, hands balling into fists as he thought of how he'd treated her, his own disappointment and anger disgusting him now.

"I'm sure she had her reasons, Chief. Maybe she didn't want to drag you down with her."

A stirring in the bed drew their attention to the wounded Spartan. Brown eyes opened and took in the surroundings, wrists flexed as she tested the restraints. She glared sullenly at the IVs snaking through her arm, trying to reach up and rip them out with her fingertips.

"Why, Laura? Why didn't you tell me?" She turned and stared at him, dark eyes boring into his own, a lifeless void where there had once been a bright flame.

"Would you really have listened? Would anyone have listened? He thought he could get away with murder, because he was an officer, but justice is seen as cold-blooded. Is this what I gave my life to protect, this corrupt bureaucracy that calls itself the UNSC?" She stared at him, a pleading look on her face. "Please, kill me before they do. I will not die by their orders."

"You won't die at all. Lorienta decided to pay them a visit, shortly after your suicide attempt. Knowing her, she'll have the data to prove your innocence."

"And that will help me how?" she shot back, a trace of the old fire back in her eyes. "I've already been labeled as a murderer, and I've already been tried and found guilty by the rest of the planet. Even when presented with proof, they'd refuse to believe it. No, it's better to die than be branded a murderess as well as a traitoress." With sudden strength, Laura managed to snap her restraints, trying to escape. John grabbed her and held her down.

"Even if they refuse to believe, I will, Laura, I promise. I won't let you do this. Your killing yourself isn't going to bring your mother or our children back." Unnoticed by either of them, Johnson's head shot up. \_Did the Chief say 'our children'? Blade and the Chief? No wonder Ackerson had an interest, but why kill them?\_ The answer hit him hard: what better way to get revenge on Blade than to kill her family, and take away her reason to keep fighting? \_That sick bastard!\_

"There's nothing left for me here, not anymore! Everyone who ever cared is dead or thinks I'm a monster! I have nowhere to go, and nothing left, do you hear me!" She was screaming at him now, her feelings of rage, grief, and betrayal pouring out of her like a black flood until she lay sobbing in his arms. All John could do was hold her, and wish that none of this had come to pass.

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It didn't take long for Laura to be acquitted of the murder charge, and even though people had formed opinions, the true story spread quickly through the rumor mill. Rather than hostile stares, Laura found herself receiving more pitying looks than anything else. It bothered her, though, and as soon as she could she tried to disappear. For a brief time she stayed with her younger brother and his family, but after a few weeks she packed a backpack and headed for Silver Pond.

It wasn't too hard to get by on her own in the woods; she'd had extensive training in outdoor survival, and knew everything she needed. Her only fear was discovery, so she took care to move her

camp from place to place, never staying in one spot for long. Unfortunately, she underestimated the persistence of a Spartan, especially one in love and determined to find what he wanted.

She'd just returned from fishing when she noticed her camp wasn't quite the way she'd left it. A few items were not in their places, and the tent flap was open. Quietly she pulled a knife, crept up to the tent, pulled open the flap—and found it empty. A hand grabbed her wrist, and she felt herself being turned around; looking up she found herself staring at John, a John whose face registered anger, relief, pain, and love all at once.

"Why did you leave, \_alaya\_?"

"I couldn't stay, I don't belong in the military anymore. Hell, I don't belong anywhere, there's nothing left for me, really." She looked down. "I just wanted some part of my life back."

"And you'll get it," John whispered, pulling her against him. "They're letting us go, kind of. We're going into semi-retirement, and we're going to live like any other military officer." He kissed her softly, gently, holding her close as he whispered, "A normal life, and everything that comes with it."

Laura felt something being slipped on her finger, and looked down to see a silver ring, one diamond sparkling in the light. John had spent quite a bit of time with her younger brother before he started looking for her, and Commander Morisson had given him quite a bit of advice. The officer had also helped him pick the ring, even gave him an idea as to where she could be found. "Laura, marry me?" he whispered against her lips, kissing her gently even as he asked her.

"Yes, John, yes." She kissed him again and again, the old passion returning in his arms, feeling hope stirring in her heart, hope that had hidden itself away long ago.

She was free.

## 20. Chapter 20: Alternate Epilogue

Well, this is it--the last of the alternate/deleted scenes. Hopefully nobody is disappointed with this last one, but it seemed to fit somehow. Thanks for reading and reviewing--the best praise any writer could ask for! Enjoy! Disclaimer: I own nothing from Halo: Combat Evolved or from any of the books.

### 20: Home At Last

John smiled at the picture frame sitting on the living room table: five faces grinned back at him, his own and his fellow Spartans. The still-shot had been taken shortly after Fred, Linda, and Kelly had mysteriously reappeared, and now occupied a place of honor in his home—his wife had insisted on it.

\_Wife\_. In all his years as a soldier, John never thought he'd end up married, and certainly not to a maverick military operative. \_Funny how things never end up the way you expect,\_ he thought.



A small spot of white caught his eye: it looked like a speck of dust on the glass. When he went to wipe it off, though, he noticed it was inside the frame; opening the picture frame, he was surprised to find another sheet of paper behind the five Spartans' picture. There were words written on it, words written in his wife's bold writing:

Lost Soul

I walk alone in shadows

Where none can see my face.

Yet still I hear from many that

I do not know my place.

They know not of my trials,

But still they make these claims.

It only makes me sorrow more,

For such are all their aims.

I am but smoke upon the wind,

A shadow in the night.

Yet who would guess this faceless wraith

Would hunger for the light?

My outer face a hated mask,

Bitter, cruel, hard and cold.

Within my heart compassion waits

Loving arms to enfold.

The world could never understand

The reason I must hide.

For all they know all kindness left,

Replaced by hate and pride.

I walk alone in shadows,

My face hid by a mask.

No one will dare to look beyond,

And no one cares to ask.

Had she really felt that way, all those years ago? He knew she'd spent the better part of her military career as a solo operative, knew how many times she'd been lied to and betrayed, but he never

thought it had gotten to her that badly.

"Guess I didn't hide that well enough," a soft voice murmured behind him; John turned to see his wife leaning against the back of his chair. She was very pregnant, and yet she still managed to sneak up behind him.

"I found it behind our picture," John replied, glancing between the paper and the woman. "I never thought the unstoppable Blade would ever feel pain like that, at least not in her younger days."

Laura smirked. "Younger days, indeed. I wrote that one when I was eighteen, right when ONI decided to bury my existence. I'd found out what they were going to do, and no one was listening to my protests. They told me to be grateful that I wasn't going anywhere, that I was being allowed to stay where I was." Rolling her eyes, she muttered under her breath, "Pricks."

It was taking her a lot of effort to stand; John got up and tried to help her sit down. Laura glared at him, then winced and placed a hand over her protruding abdomen.

"Are you alright?"

"Fine, John. Somebody's just not happy with me right now." She took his hand and placed it on her stomach, watching John's expression go from puzzled to pleased.

"He's definitely a kicker."

"Who said it would be a boy?" Laura smiled; she loved teasing him sometimes. "With a temper like that, it's probably a girl." Her brown eyes darkened, and John saw tears beginning to gather at the corners; she was remembering Sam and Kelly. He gently wiped them away, kissing his wife as he did so.

"Don't worry, I promise he'll be alright," he whispered. "I won't let anything happen to our child, and I know you won't either."

"I know." She smiled sadly and turned her waddling steps to the kitchen.

John winced as he and the other Spartans listened to the stream of curses coming from the delivery room. Between Laura's swearing and the nurses encouraging her to push, he was glad he wasn't in the room with her.

"She'll be fine, Master Chief," a quiet voice murmured. Angela Morisson smiled as another wave of obscenities met their ears. "It's painful, but normal. And Laura's definitely quite the fighter."

A loud scream tore through the room, followed by the thin wail of a newborn infant. Moments later a nurse poked her head out the door.

"Master Chief? She's asking for you."

Entering the room, he saw a pale version of his wife laying in the bed, a blanket-wrapped bundle in her arms. John moved closer and saw a tuft of bright red hair, chubby fists, and a scrunched-up chubby

face.

"Care to hold your daughter, John?" Laura asked, her voice strained from shouting. John picked up the tiny bundle, noting how small she seemed in his hands.

"A red-head? Neither of us have red hair."

"True, but my grandmother did. I inherited red highlights from her, and Matt was born with a head of orange fuzz. The miracles of genetics," she sighed. John was at a loss for words, but was stopped from thinking by his wife's next question.

"What should we call her?"

Laura sat on the beach, enjoying the rare vacation time as long as she could. John was somewhere with Fred, Linda, and Kelly, and Catherine—well, she hoped Catherine was with her father. \_The girl's more trouble than she's worth at times, but I wouldn't have it any other way\_, she thought with a smile.

"Mama!" A red-haired young girl came charging toward her; Laura stood and scooped her up with little effort. She spun around several times, her daughter held high in the air, red hair and brown hair flying around them as they laughed and twirled.

"Ah, my little Cat, where did you wander off to?"

"I was with Auntie Kelly and Uncle Fred," the little girl answered quickly, and even Laura could tell she was being truthful—though the girl had spirit, she was as bad a liar as her mother.

"Oh you were, were you? And just where was your daddy during all this?" Laura smiled, tapping one finger on the end of Catherine's nose.

"He went for a walk. Dunno where he went."

"Then maybe we should be heading home. Who knows? We might surprise him if he's not expecting us there." Her smile widened when Catherine took off for the house they were staying in; whenever Laura was planning a prank on her husband, Catherine was an enthusiastic—if inexperienced--assistant.

Late that night, Laura watched the sea, aware of the man behind her. John wrapped his arms around her, gentle and reassuring. \_Had anyone told me that a Spartan could be kindly, I'd have laughed\_, she thought with a smile.

"She's grown up a lot lately, and she's perceptive," John's gravelly voice filled the silence, but to her it was the most beautiful sound in the world.

"I wonder if that isn't from our augmentations," Laura replied, turning herself around. "She's sharp as a tack most of the time, sneaky and clever. Did I tell you I caught her trying to slip out the other day?"

"Oh really? Maybe we should start teaching her discipline."

"You'd better do itâ€"we both know my tendencies." Laura smiled even more and wrapped her arms around his waist. She felt at peace in his arms, happy and carefree like she was only Catherine's age.

"I'll take care of it, don't worry." Silence fell, but it was a good kind of silence, one where two souls could find comfort and peace. It had been a long road, but they'd finally come home, and neither one intended to leave. The Spartans were here to stay.

End  
file.